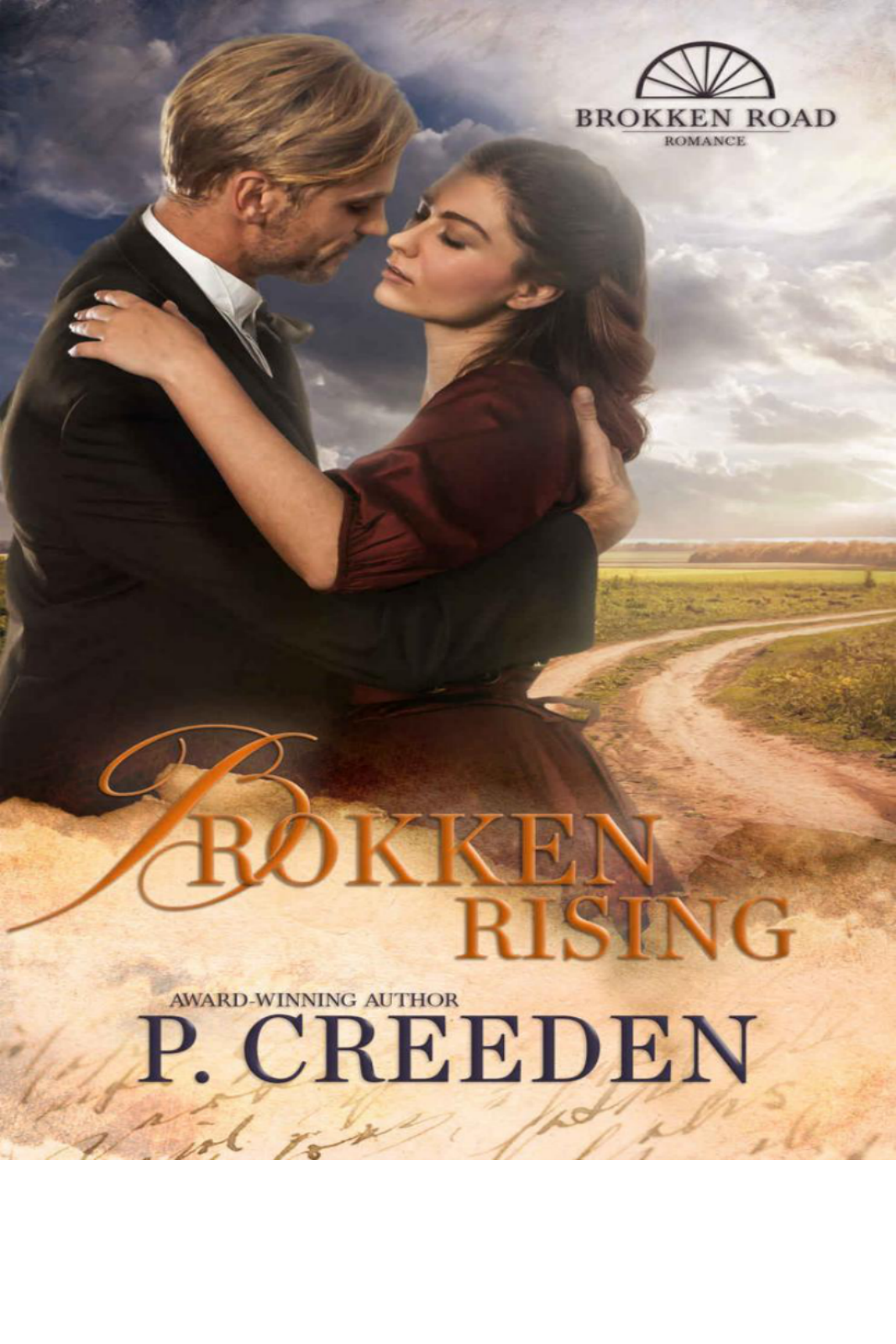




BROKEN ROAD
ROMANCE



BROKEN RISING

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

P. CREEDEN

Brokken Rising

Brokken Road Romances

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Brokken Arrow

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Brokken Rising

Rebecca Walsh has only ever had two loves, her family and horses. But when her father and brother died in the Civil War, her family is left as broken as her home town. When the town sent an advertisement for mail-order grooms, Rebecca didn't have much interest in wooing one. She just hoped the men might save her town, so her family could stay in the only home they'd ever known.

Jake Harper came to Brokken, Texas to leave his past behind. He hoped to find a future that would help him forget the mistakes he'd made and the horrors of war. But one of the other "leftover" men in town has been keeping an eye on Jake and his past might be catching up with him. And as he draws closer to Rebecca, his fears multiply.

Chapter 1

Rebecca Walsh took a deep breath and blew it out. This was a complete waste of her time, but she needed to be supportive of her town as well as her family. The fresh scent of rain filled her lungs though the sky had nary a cloud in it any longer. The short storm had come through and gone overnight.

Her sister, Lydia, skipped ahead of her, bubbling over like a newly-dug well, raising the hem of her dress as she stepped over a puddle. Rebecca had no skirt that she needed to lift. She only had to open her stride since she had gotten in the habit of wearing her brother's older breeches after her father and brother had gone to serve in the war. The people in town raised eyebrows at her in the beginning, but now she rarely garnered more than a second glance.

"Oh, Becca, do you imagine the men will be handsome?" Lydia asked, a huge smile spreading across her face. She was always a hopeless romantic, which suited her well. Lydia had a greater chance at attracting a man than she did. Lydia's blonde hair, curled to perfection, with tiny ringlets bouncing, and an extra spring in her step was attractive. Lydia had curves in all the right places, and she knew her beauty and how to work it to her advantage. Her charm worked on one of the Brokken brothers and resulted in a collection of small trinkets he had given in hopes of winning her affections. And the occasional man who traveled through their small town of Brokken, located in an isolated area of Texas endeavored to catch her eye, but those men never intended to stay, and Lydia had no intention of leaving her family.

"Handsome is not what we need," Rebecca said finally. Part of her wished her sister would be a bit more practical rather than superficial. "The most important question is will they help rebuild our town?"

"You're such a croaker! This town will be just fine, Becca. Now, about these men..."

Rebecca shook her head at her sister, and Lydia made a goofy face between a pout and a smile. Rebecca caved with a laugh. "Well, I do hope there's a good man among them with a strong work ethic. I could use some help around the livery."

Her sister shook her head at her. "Your brain is filled with horses all the time."

"And yours is filled with what man is looking at you right now."

Lydia giggled. "I suppose that's true."

They reached the train platform where they met up with their sister Hannah who stood with the town's teacher, training to take over the school; their mother, who leaned a bit on their youngest sibling, fifteen-year-old Noah, who often was mistaken for ten or eleven.

Since their eldest brother, Dan Junior and their Papa were lost in the war, the role of man of the house should have fallen to Noah, but he'd always been a sickly, small child, and was often coddled by their mother... and even Rebecca. Because of this, the role of running the livery had fallen almost exclusively on Rebecca's shoulders, though Noah helped when he could.

A quarter of the town stood on the train's platform, waiting for the train of "leftovers." These were men who'd answered the town's advertisement for grooms and men to help rebuild the town of Brokken but had not been in direct contact with a specific match. The late March weather was dry and breezy with a touch of heat as the sun beat down almost directly overhead.

Rebecca wanted to know what these men were like just as much as anyone else. There weren't many options for a spouse in Brokken. The town was nearly abandoned during the Civil War, and if this last-ditch effort of the sheriff and pastor's didn't work, the Walsh family would have to move from the only home she'd ever known. Rebecca felt safe in Brokken with memories of her father and growing up. Lydia felt the same, but her romantic sister also wanted a happy ending. But Rebecca wasn't pretty like Lydia was—she had no doubt her sister would find a happy ending, even if at best, Rebecca married for convenience, rather than love. She'd be content with just finding a strong man to work next to.

Pastor Grisson and Sheriff Victoria stood at the front of the crowd. Apparently, they were in charge of weeding out the unsuitable men. With his handkerchief, the pastor wiped sweat that had formed upon his brow and kept an eye out for the smoke stack cloud that had formed down the stretch of train tracks. It wouldn't be long before the train arrived. The sheriff stood next to her father, tall and proud, with nearly the same sweat upon her brow, and the same habit of wringing her kerchief when her hands rested in front of her.

Rebecca's mom leaned toward her. "Couldn't you have at least worn a dress today, of all days? How do you expect any man to see you as a woman when you dress like that?"

Tightening her jaw, Rebecca bristled. "I'm fine as I am, Momma. If a man cannot see the woman in me beyond the breeches, then what

need do I have of him?"

Her mother's frown deepened, but she couldn't say much more, as the train arrived. This group had answered the advertisement but had not corresponded with a particular lady in town. Lydia had desired to correspond with one of the men from the beginning, but their mother had wanted her to wait and meet the men in person when they arrived. Rebecca had no such designs on corresponding with the men. She only wanted help in the livery and that's the sort of man she was looking for.

Her mother gasped when the first man dismounted, missing a leg and walking with the use of a cane. Another had a long pink scar that followed his jawline. One by one, they descended, scarred and broken. All the men possessed darkness in their eyes, as if they had seen far too much in this life. Tears stung the backs of Rebecca's eyes. At least they were alive. How much would she have given to have her father and her brother back, even maimed? She would have given up one of her own limbs just to have that. Her throat tightened at the thought.

"This was really the best we could do?" her mother asked under her breath.

The tears stopped at Rebecca's lashes, where she blinked them away. "They are fine, mother. They are men with hopeful hearts and strong hands. They will help us rebuild the town. They are not a disappointment."

And before her mother said another word to her, Rebecca stepped forward to the first man who limped in her direction with a bag. His blue eyes fixed on hers, holding a question in them. Though her heart thundered in her chest, Rebecca forced herself to ask, "Sir, do you happen to be handy with horses?"

He blinked at her, his eyebrows shooting up toward hair that was nearly as blond as Lydia's. His deep voice was gruff and gravelly. He drawled, "Yes, miss. My family owned the livery in Atlanta. I worked there as a boy before the war."

She couldn't help but smile up at him. He was so very tall and slender. She stuck her hand out for a handshake, just as her father would have done. "Then, could I offer you a job while you're in town? We need the help of an experienced horseman. My name is Rebecca Walsh, and my family owns the livery in Brokken. It was left in my care since my father and brother went to serve."

He nodded, his face turning hard for half a moment before it softened again. He gripped Rebecca's hand in his, and she was happy that he took it and shook it, treating her like an equal instead of like the lesser of the sexes. His palm rubbed against hers for half a moment, thick with callouses, before he pulled away. He cleared his throat. "Jake Wheeler. And I'm happy to make your acquaintance."

Something about the way he said happy made Rebecca's heart flutter a bit, but she shoved that feeling back down. She hadn't seen a single man with marriage prospects in five years before the men started arriving. She was overreacting and shook her head a little to clear it. She pointed down the roadway. "Once you're settled in, Mr. Wheeler, be sure to come by the livery and ask for me. I'd be happy to show you around."

"I'd like that. Thank you, miss."

She nodded again and stepped back toward her mother, sisters, and brother, her cheeks burning. Her shoulders relaxed once she no longer looked in his cool blue eyes. Her moment of bravery came out from defying her mother but it slipped away and only embarrassment remained. Her mother glared at her as she returned to her side.

Shaking her head, Momma whispered, "I really hope this works out the way you plan. That man looks strong enough, but watch him limp as he walks away..."

At her sides, Rebecca's hands fisted. "Don't judge a book by its cover, Mother. I'm sure things will work out just fine."

Then she turned on her heels and marched away. Lydia chased after her. Once they were several yards away from the crowd, Lydia spoke. "I don't know why you and mother can't get along for just a minute. This is supposed to be a happy occasion."

Rebecca shrugged. "Happy or not, those men all have lost things and are trying to find a new way of life. Brokken needs them. We just need to open our arms and accept them. Judging them without giving them a chance will not help anything."

"I know, but Momma always says what she's thinking. And you're almost as bad."

She turned to frown at her. "Don't compare me to Momma again."

Lydia's eyes went wide. She nodded, without speaking.

Rebecca continued marching her way back to the livery. She didn't care to meet any more of the men who reminded her of the ones whom she'd lost. Right now, she needed to concentrate on the young horse waiting at the barn who needed to be worked.

Chapter 2

Jake stepped up to the other men who'd gotten off their train car in Brokken. Three more men followed from the next car, and the pastor moved forward to help. Before anyone could offer any assistance, the men were lifting their own luggage and heading over to where the rest of the men stood. The man with a missing leg struggled a bit with his bag.

The preacher quickly reached to help, but the man snapped, "I got it, I got it!"

The older woman from the livery flinched. Jake could only assume that she was Mrs. Walsh. The young man next to her kept his eyes down, but the preacher didn't so much as blink. "All right, then. Anyone else want a hand?"

No one said a word.

The pastor nodded and the woman who stood with him wearing a badge addressed the crowd. "Well, then, welcome to Brokken. I'm Sheriff Victoria English. You will be staying at Brokken Arrow Ranch. Any questions?" She crossed her arms over her chest as though she was finished talking.

No one responded.

The pastor cleared his throat. "I'm Pastor Grisson, and I will be watching over everyone as well as the sheriff while you're in town. We expect you all to behave as if God is watching your every movement. If I hear of any shenanigans, there will be words."

The sheriff mumbled under her breath, holding a hand on the hilt of her pistol. "Maybe more than that."

With a nod, the pastor continued. "The women of this town mean a great deal to myself and the rest of the community. They are true women – kind and caring. You can't find any better."

The female sheriff nodded. "We best be on our way. It's a short way to the ranch from here. That's where y'all will be staying since the hotel is now full."

The man with the missing limb removed his hat and gave the sheriff a quick nod. "Thank you, ma'am. I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say we appreciate your kindness."

He smiled kindly at the pastor and the rest of the crowd, put his hat back on, and picked up his luggage once more. The others gave murmurs of agreement but seemed to be eager to be on their way. Jake sighed and grabbed his bag. Although there was a cool breeze constantly blowing, sweat dribbled down Jake's back as he followed the crowd headed toward the ranch down the road. It had been a long ride to Texas by train. The men had smelled of horses, musk and leather. No one had been able to wash up well in the several days journey to Brokken from Georgia. And as he eyed the town they walked through, Jake got the feeling the place wasn't much more than a ghost town. There were mostly women and older children in the crowd of townspeople. The other men murmured seeing the same things Jake did.

"This is why you're here," the sheriff said as they rode through the empty town, passing a saloon.

The pastor added. "The saloon has long since closed its doors except for special occasions. There simply were not enough visitors to keep it open on the regular. You'll see that several businesses have closed up shop, but we've made sure to keep the general store open..."

Jack lifted a brow. It seemed like there was a lot more to that story than the pastor was saying. Had the general store been struggling because of the lack of people, too?

When they climbed a rise, the ranch appeared over the hill. The preacher lifted his voice. "The lovely family at Brokken Arrow Ranch is opening its doors to you, but you're expected to help, to earn your keep. As you know, you're here to in hopes of wedding one of the lovely women of Brokken. We are a struggling township, and your presence here is greatly needed and appreciated. In two weeks, there will be a dinner for you all to become acquainted with each other at the hotel. The following week there will be a festival, and you will be expected to select one of the women for possible marriage."

Some grunts and nodding went up among the crowd of men. It was clear to Jake that none were particularly thrilled with their current lot in life, and he didn't blame them. If their lives were anything like his, what they left behind was far worse than the path that lay ahead of them now. Some may not have had families to speak of or anything to keep them in their hometowns. Regardless, they all came here for the same thing--a new, fresh start. The men remained silent for the rest of the walk down the hill. The crowd of townspeople who'd accompanied them on their trip through town had slowly dwindled so that it had become mostly the men headed to the ranch. As the day grew on, everyone seemed to be in the same situation as Jake, exhausted and tired.

Not long after everyone was shown the bunkhouse, the crowd of

townspeople reappeared with food for a large outdoor dinner. The townspeople prepared the table and then stepped back and allowed the men to sit to eat. It seemed a bit strange at first, but Jake did as the rest and took a seat. He hoped that some of the awkwardness might go away as people got used to the environment and to each other. It was good that they all had a few weeks to get to know each other. And Jake was happy to be working with his hands to help earn his keep.

A pretty blond girl, with curves that made her seem older than her sweetheart-shaped, young face suggested, passed out cornbread. She smiled a bit bigger when she reached him. "Here you are, sir. Did your trip go well?"

He nodded as he took the cornbread from her hand. "It could have been worse."

"But not much," someone else quipped, and general chuckles spread around the men.

Red tinged the young woman's cheeks, as though she were sorry to have asked.

To help temper the situation, Jake leaned in toward her. "At least the weather was nice the whole trip. If it had been storming, it would have been much harder on everyone. Thank you for asking."

Murmurs and grunts of assent went around the table, and the blond woman beamed and slid an extra piece of cornbread on his plate. She tilted her head toward him. "I'm Lydia, by the way."

"Jake."

She nodded and continued on, passing out the bread. He smiled and lifted an eyebrow at the extra piece on his plate. Apparently, the reward for being kind sometimes came in the form of extra cornbread. He took a bite of the one he'd had in his hand and continued with the meal.

Standing across the way, the woman in breeches caught his gaze. What was her name again? Rebecca. She seemed a hard, strong woman. One who didn't flirt or play nonsense games. Even after delivering her dish and setting it on the table, she spoke in hushed tones about a horse to a young woman standing at the front porch. Her grandparents seemed to own the ranch.

Rebecca's voice had a melodic tone that Jake felt he could get used to. "Lucky's coming along fine. His ride today went well. I'm sure he'll be here doing ranch work before the festival, even."

"That's great news."

Rebecca smiled at the girl, and the sight of it made Jake almost choke. It had seemed till that moment that Rebecca Walsh only knew how to frown, but when she smiled, it was like the sun coming out after a storm. She was much more striking than he'd originally

noticed. He couldn't help but look around the table to see if anyone else had noticed, too, but the other men seemed too preoccupied with their meal. Jake grabbed hold of his metal cup and swigged some water to help down an especially dry bite of cornbread. When he looked up again, Rebecca was gone. He blinked and looked around but couldn't spot her. In fact, most of the townspeople had already disappeared again. He looked down at his plate and saw that he'd eaten less than half while most of the other men at the table were nearly finished.

"You going to eat that?" the man with a scar down his cheek asked, eyeing the second piece of cornbread on Jake's plate.

Jake lifted his plate and offered it to him. "It's yours if you want it."

The man smiled wide, the pink scar on his face stretching and catching the light, so that anyone would have stared at it. Jake caught himself and looked at his plate as he set it back down in front of him.

"Thank you," the man said, as though he hadn't noticed Jake's staring.

Jake ate the rest of his supper without looking up again. Soon everyone was up and clearing the table, and by then, he was ready to join them. Then an older colored gentleman stepped in front of the men. "Y'all can call me Mr. Isaac. I'll be showing y'all the duties you'll be performing around the ranch while you're here."

Chapter 3

When Rebecca arrived back at her house after taking care of the horses in the livery, Lydia virtually tackled her. Rebecca had to laugh at her younger sister's excitement.

Rebecca tried to loosen her sister's grasp. "I guess this is all about the men staying at the Brokken Arrow Ranch. That's just the first batch of leftovers, you know. I'm sure there are more on their way."

"Maybe," she smiled, swinging Rebecca back and forth.

Rebecca pushed her sister off her. "Well, one of them must have caught your eye."

"Well, they may not be the handsomest bunch, but that one I was talkin' to?" Lydia said, a huge grin on her face. She looked as if she was five years old again, sneaking into Nana's cookie jar. "He seems sweet as honey, and well, if I had to choose, I'd say I choose him." She laughed.

Rebecca frowned. Despite her efforts, she was intrigued by the same man that Lydia had taken an interest in. As much as she'd like to say she'd picked a man at random to talk to earlier, she hadn't. She'd noticed his kind eyes. And more. There was something about him that sparked an interest in her, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Whatever it was, she kept picturing him as she worked about the ranch. She knew it was foolish to chase after him, especially now that Lydia had clearly staked her claim.

She let out a slow breath and tried to smile at her sister. "I guess it's good you made a choice."

She stepped around Lydia and started working on peeling potatoes. Everyone in town was making double-sized portions of sides when they could to help the Brokken Arrow Ranch feed the load of men who'd arrived. Lydia prattled on, but Rebecca kept her head down and kept working. Eventually their mother came in, and Lydia found a new target for her excitement.

Rebecca's shoulders relaxed as she finished peeling the potatoes. The man's crystal blue eyes popped in her vision again. She shook it away. She would not compete with her sister over a man.

As if it would even be a contest at all. What man would choose her

over Lydia? She sighed and picked up another potato. She just wanted to make sure that her sister was happy and if a marriage between Lydia and Mr. Wheeler would do that, it was all Rebecca needed to be happy.



JAKE HOPPED onto his bunk and stared at the bottom of the bed above him. What was he doing here? Life had been so much simpler when he was young, and the world seemed full of hope. But now the war had stripped him of his humanity, destroyed his innocence, destroyed his hope. Not that he had any grand idea of love, especially given the darkness he witnessed in both himself and others, but he longed for something... anything... to fill this void he had been carrying. While he lay on his bunk, he realized his bunkmate had stepped in and was staring at him. Something about his silence unnerved him. He bolted up and met the man's gaze.

"Oh, hey there," Jake said, grabbing his hat and standing up.

"Name's Emmet Forest," the man said and stuck out his hand.

"Jake Wheeler," he said, noticing the man's yankee accent. He wasn't sure why, but he'd noticed Emmet watching him the entire afternoon since dinner. Emmet had been riding in the other train car, from parts unknown, and Jake wasn't up to asking about it. He had too much riding on this. As much as he had lost his sense of hope during the war, he was clinging to the slightest seed of hope that he'd find something more out here in Brokken. He couldn't lose out on that, not when he was so close to a freedom he hadn't known in ages. If he was lucky, maybe he could find a break from the reminders of his past.

It was a weight for him to bear alone. Even a wife couldn't take away the secrets in his heart. He had no safe place to put them. But if he could just find a small peace, if he could just have a moment's reprieve, perhaps he could one day start to heal.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Wheeler." Emmet smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

Jake's jaw flexed. Maybe he was just being paranoid. He nodded. "Same to you." Despite his fears, he needed to maintain a poker face. Showing fear wouldn't help the situation. As his Papa always said, you can get away with anything, so long as you had a good poker face.

"You're on bottom then?" asked Emmet.

Jake nodded. "If you don't mind."

"Nope." And with that, Emmet hopped on the upper bunk. Jake lay back down on his bunk, feeling every movement the man made above him. Other men came into the bunkhouse, and they were quickly

enveloped in murmurs and multiple conversations. Candlelight danced on the ceiling and cast shadows on the walls. The night was getting chilly, and other than removing his boots, Jake felt more comfortable wearing most of his clothes. He pulled a rough blanket over him and settled into his bunk.

The journey had been a long, tedious one, but surely things wouldn't be about whether you were Union or Confederacy here, so far away from Atlanta. He let his mind drift back to the women he had met. Lydia was a beauty, that was for sure, with her wide hazel eyes and beautiful blonde hair. He could see himself living a life with a woman like her, except... there was something different about Rebecca. A hardness, as if she didn't care that he was there, and for some reason, her indifference left him curious and intrigued. He felt as if she had a story inside her that a girl like Lydia could never understand, and he wanted to figure it out. It was in that moment he decided he would make the best out of this little adventure. He would discover what Rebecca's story was. Still, he wouldn't mind getting to know Lydia better. He suspected there was more to her than the surface she displayed. And just maybe, he'd find someone to share the next chapter of his life with.



JAKE BOLTED UP, his face and limbs covered in sweat.

"You fell asleep the moment your head hit that bunk. Rough night, I take it?" Emmet asked. Jake jumped once more at the sound of his voice. The man sat on the footlocker nearest their bunk, getting dressed.

Outside, the light of dawn tinged the area around the curtains the faintest gold.

"Just a heck of a nightmare." Jake laughed, but he was unsettled. He wondered if perhaps Emmet had heard him talking in his sleep, if he had heard the secrets that haunted him. He eyed the man again who lifted his brow and gave him a knowing smile. Emmet looked like he could read Jake like a book. Though Jake had no idea if his suspicions were true, he knew he couldn't behave fearfully. Besides, this was above his bend. God had a funny way of catchin' up to you, his Papa always said. No secret was safe from Him.

But he was running from the War, not God, right? A tinge of guilt flooded him at the thought he'd not really spoken or thought much about his creator since he'd started on the journey to Brokken. No, before that. Although in the war there were plenty of times that men cried out for God or their mother, Jake hadn't felt that was a whole lot better than taking the Lord's name in vain. But what did he know?

All he knew was he needed to get out of this room and away from prying eyes. He needed to calm his mind before it drove him mad. He sat up from his bunk and slipped his feet back into his boots. He was glad that he'd gone to sleep fully dressed. At least he didn't have to stick around and speak with Emmet before heading out the door. He needed a walk and he needed some fresh air.

Chapter 4

What little excitement Rebecca had over the arrival of the men quickly turned sour. Even that morning at breakfast, Lydia couldn't stop talking about them, especially the only man who'd caught both their interest. Rebecca had decided that maybe none of the men were right for her anyway. It was hard living with Lydia who couldn't stop talking about them. Instead, she'd just get back to work, like she always did. Living with the horses was fulfilling enough. She didn't mind if everyone in Brokken got a husband except for her. That would suit her just fine.

At least that's what she told herself as she opened the backdoor of their house and headed toward the barn. Rebecca was happy with who she was, and enjoyed the sense of independence she held, but sometimes she wished she could walk into a room and capture everyone's attention the way Lydia did. The backdoor swung open again, and Rebecca waited for her brother, Noah, to catch up with her. She reached over with a hand to rough his hair, but he ducked away from her. She smiled.

Lydia and Hannah stayed inside with their momma to clean the kitchen. Lydia wouldn't be caught dead working with the horses. She often complained about the smell of the stables, even holding her nose when Noah and Rebecca walked in from their daily chores. They were night and day, Rebecca and Lydia, and though she always knew this, Rebecca wasn't sure which of them was night and which was day. And she couldn't help but wonder if a man would truly desire a woman like her. She had been told on many occasions she rode a horse better than most men in Brokken, and the sheriff had taught her to be an expert shot when she'd taken on the role of caring for her family. They were all great qualities, but she knew it made her intimidating.

Once in the barn, she grabbed a bale of hay while Noah walked out to the corral to grab the newest horse and bring him in. Rebecca threw the hay into one of the stalls, as she heard a curse slip from her brother outside. Although she wanted to go check on him, she also knew he needed to figure things out for himself. Especially with the horses. They could be stubborn, and she knew she wouldn't always be

around to help Noah with his chores. She hesitated, though. Noah was small and often needed help when the work grew difficult. It was challenging for him to become the only man in the house at ten years old when Papa and Dan Jr left. It was hard on everyone to lose them. Had either of them still been alive, life might have been a bit different for the Walsh family. Rebecca quickly assumed a parental role with Noah when their father passed. She didn't mind it most days, but when she saw her sweet, little brother try to fit the role of man of the house... and failing, it broke her heart.

She peeked through the stable doors as he struggled to get the horse to cooperate with him. Just as she stepped out the stable doors, she noticed a shadow approaching her brother in the distance.

When she reached the yard, Noah spotted her. He flailed his hands, as if to say he gave up. She smiled gently, but before she could even think about going to help him, the man she saw walking toward them was standing before her. *Jake Wheeler*. Her heart fluttered at the sight of him and she chastised herself for being foolish. Hadn't she just decided to stop thinking about men?

"Mornin'," he said, tipping his hat.

"Mornin'," Rebecca repeated. "What are you doin' out here?"

He lifted a brow at her. "Didn't you say to come see you once I got settled in? Besides, it looks like this young man could use the help."

Noah raised his hands, stepping aside to allow the man to help. Rebecca started to protest but remembered her mother's urging to allow men to feel useful. Rebecca knew her stubborn nature hardly allowed room for anyone but herself to feel useful. And she'd forgotten that she'd asked him to come once he settled in. Mr. Wheeler stepped into the corral, his voice calm and gentle, his posture confident. Rebecca eyed him. The man handled the horse in a way she'd never seen anyone but herself do. She was surprised.

"Impressive." She walked up to the man and handed him a lead rope. "So, your family owned a livery in Atlanta, you said?"

He nodded, snapping the lead rope on the horse's halter. "Yes, miss."

Noah stepped up toward the man to take the lead rope from him. "It's nice to meet you, mister. I'm Noah Walsh."

"You can feel free to call me Jake." He tipped his hat at Noah and then put out a hand to shake. A wide smile spread across Noah's face as he took the horse and started heading back toward the barn. By giving her younger brother just his first name, Mr. Wheeler was already treating her fifteen-year-old brother as an equal. Her heart tightened in her chest at that bit of kindness.

Jake stepped up to the fence and leaned against a post. "So, your family takes care of the livery. Is it just you and Noah?"

“There's the two of us, but we also have two other sisters. I believe you've met one. Lydia.” Rebecca could have slapped herself for bringing up her sister, but it was out of her mouth before she could stop herself.

“Who?” he asked.

“At the dinner yesterday, she was passing out the cornbread. Blond, wavy hair...”

He smiled and raised his hand. “Of course. She was very kind to me and the others. I reckon she left an impression on all of us.” He laughed, but Rebecca did not join him. All she could think about is the fact this man who made her heart flutter was likely going to choose her sister. When faced with that kind of decision, who would choose her?

She swallowed and shot an eye toward the barn.

“She didn't seem the type to help you with the barn work though. What about your other sister?” Mr. Wheeler's voice called over her shoulder.

Rebecca shook her head. “Hannah would much rather read a book.”

He laughed and pushed off the post. “Well, how about we get started with the chores, and you can show me about.”

Jake remained attentive as she showed him how to work around their livery. The man's experience level was everything Rebecca would have expected from someone who'd been raised to help in a livery. When lunch time came around, Hannah brought out sandwiches and tea for Noah, Rebecca, and Jake, because Momma had noticed him there. Sometime in the morning, Lydia had gone off to the ranch to help Deborah Brokken with getting ready for dinner.

“What's this horse's name?” Jake asked, patting the chestnut gelding on the head.

“That one is Lucky. He's going to be a ranch horse for the Brokken family once he's finished training. He was supposed to be the youngest Brokken son's project, but...” she trailed off and shook her head, grabbing another pitchfork full of manure and tossing it into the wheelbarrow they were sharing while they mucked the stalls.

“But?” he asked, scraping the shovel along the ground and placing the pile in the wheelbarrow.

She scrunched her brows and nose when she looked back at him. “I'm sure you'll hear it from somebody, but I'm really not one to gossip, so I'd rather not say.”

He shrugged and nodded. “Fine, let's not worry about it. Must be unpleasant, and I really don't want anything to ruin this pleasant day and pleasant conversation.”

That smoothed the wrinkles right out of her brow as she peered

over at him and blinked. He hummed a little while he continued to work, not looking over at her. And he hadn't even mentioned Lydia all day. It was the first time anyone had shown her such attention, and he made her feel as if she was the only girl who mattered in this town. It felt as if he genuinely enjoyed her company, and the idea warmed Rebecca's heart. All too often she had been a side character to her sister, and it was refreshing to have someone finally see her.

Noah returned from dumping the other wheelbarrow and took the one in front of them as the two of them finished putting in the last pitchfork and shovel full. Even though it wasn't a hot day, the work made sweat bead on their faces, and Rebecca swiped her brow with the forearm of her linen shirt.

"Well, that looks like the last thing we need to do for the day," Rebecca finished. "It's not quite supper time, but if you'd like to stay, I'm sure Momma would be happy to set another place at the table."

He shook his head. "No. I really should get back to the ranch and help with what work I can there, too. It's only fitting that we all do what we can to earn our keep."

"Thank you for your help, Mr. Wheeler."

His lopsided smile exposed a dimple on his left cheek. "Of course. Anytime."

Noah returned a moment later. "Will you return tomorrow, Jake?"

Rebecca nearly laughed but held back with thinned lips. Mr. Wheeler was the first gentleman older than Noah who'd allowed the familiarity of using only a first name, and it still sounded funny to her ears, and then she noticed Jake looking expectantly at her.

"Oh," she shook her head. "We won't need as much help tomorrow as we did today. And like you said, I don't want to take you away from the ranch if they could use your help, too. Just come by when it doesn't seem there's as much work, or whenever you can spare the time."

Mr. Wheeler nodded, his blue eyes sparkling. "I'd like that, miss. Thank you."

Chapter 5

“Y'all are done early today,” Momma Greeted Noah and Rebecca as they came inside. Her mother had been frantically running about the house as if searching for something. Rebecca never found out what, though she was sure her mother told her. She was high on a cloud no one else could see or reach. What was this man doing to her?

She smiled to herself as she headed to her room. Lydia stopped her.

“What are you smiling about?” she asked, teasingly.

“Oh, I just—” she stopped herself, suddenly feeling guilty. “It’s nothing,” she lied, “It was just a joke that Noah told.”

She knew she couldn’t risk upsetting Lydia. She knew she was making a mistake by spending so much time with Mr. Wheeler, but she enjoyed his company. Besides, she reasoned with herself, it wasn’t as if she sought him out. No. It wasn’t her choice. It just happened.

“Hm. Is that so?” Lydia eyed her carefully, but then laughed. “You’re such a silly woman, I swear. Come on, let’s go talk about those boys! I bet that’s why you’re smilin’. You’re just as excited as I am.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I’ve gotta help Momma get supper ready, Lydia. Could we pine after the men later? Would that be fine?”

“You’re such a stick-in-the-mud!” Lydia rolled her eyes.

Rebecca sighed, trying to decide if she wanted to argue with her sister or just give in. Lydia’s wide smile and bright eyes made the decision for her. She knew that despite her jealousies this was an exciting time for both, especially Lydia. She threw her hands in the air, “Oh. Fine then. Help me make the biscuits. Let’s talk.”

“Oh, good!” Lydia squealed and grabbed her by the arm while they headed for the kitchen. “Well, I think Mr. Wheeler is quite the looker.”

Blood rushed to Rebecca’s cheeks. Lydia didn’t know that most of Rebecca’s day had been spent with the very man she referred to. And now Lydia knew the man’s name. She swallowed. “Oh, I thought Mr. Thomas would have caught your attention, or maybe even that Mr. Forest,” Rebecca threw the idea out, only hoping just a small bit that her sister would latch onto it. Perhaps if she saw the other men as

attractive, her attentions wouldn't be so focused on Jake.

"Ew! Are you joking? You must be! I mean, Rebecca, in case you didn't notice, Mr. Thomas is missing a limb!"

"I noticed." Rebecca shook her head. She couldn't believe how shallow her own sister was. "I'm sure he's kind and quite a gentleman. I am sure any girl would be lucky to have him. Besides, it appears Mr. Wheeler walks with a limp... I think he has a bad leg."

"A bad leg is better than no leg! Well, why don't you go be with that Thomas guy then!"

"I just might!" Rebecca snapped, throwing the dough down on the board so she could roll it out with the pin.

"Fine," Lydia said, raising her shoulders then sagging down as she handed Rebecca the biscuit cutter. "Why do we have to fight like this Becca? Why can't we just talk?"

Rebecca sighed and started cutting the biscuits out while Lydia peeled them off and set them on the pan. "I guess it's just what sisters do sometimes? You know I think the world of you. Sometimes you just get my goat."

Lydia laughed. "And so do you! Maybe we should change the topic? Mm?"

The two girls giggled and stopped talking about the arrival of the men and instead focused their attention on their family, discussing how overwhelmed their mom had seemed the last few days.

"She's worried for us," Rebecca said softly.

"But I don't want her to worry. It worries me when she worries." Lydia frowned.

"What can we do?" Rebecca said. "She's our mother. It's practically her duty to worry about us. She wants the best for us and our futures."

Lydia paused and then laughed. "Don't be so melodramatic," she teased and stood up, dusting the flour from her hands.

"Me? Melodramatic?" Rebecca laughed at the idea. "I think you're confusing me with yourself."

"Oh shush!" Lydia pushed the pan into the woodstove.

Rebecca laughed, glad they could still get along despite the high tension the arrival of the men had brought with them. She didn't want to argue with her sister, even if that meant letting go of her time with Jake. She blew out a long breath and tried to get her mind focused on something else while she waited for the biscuits to cook. She sat down next to Hannah and peered at the book she had in her hands. "What are you reading?" she asked.

Hannah looked up and smiled, showing Rebecca the cover of her novel. "*Pride and Prejudice*."

"Maybe I should read it when you're finished?" Rebecca asked, trying to bring more than a few words out of her quiet youngest sister.

Hannah shrugged. "I'll let you know when I'm done."

And then she went right back to reading. Rebecca sighed, watching her sister read quietly while Noah stood across the room with a hammer in hand, fixing her mother's rocking chair while Momma supervised. Lydia prattled on to her mother. Rebecca's family and home were the things that made her happiest. Even if she did get married, would her husband accept that about her? Would he be willing to work with the family livery and help take care of the horses, her younger siblings, and even their anxious, worried mother? She imagined that Jake would, and it created a bit of tightness in her chest. She needed to stop thinking about things in that way. If Lydia wanted Mr. Wheeler... had there ever been a man in Brokken that didn't fall for her sister's charms? Rebecca couldn't remember one. And she had to concede that if her sister married Mr. Wheeler, their family and the livery would still be well taken care of.

Could she work alongside him in that way without him being her husband? She felt her nose scrunch at the idea, and then she pushed all those thoughts out of her head. She needed to get the man out of her head as much as she could. Then, the slightest acrid smell came to her nose. She gasped. The biscuits were about to burn. She rushed to the oven and pulled them out. They would be a bit hard and overcooked, but not burnt. She let out a sigh. This was what would happen to her life if she didn't let her feelings go. And with that, she said a silent prayer for the strength she needed.



THE NEXT MORNING, Noah brooded over his bowl of oatmeal. The two of them were always the only two up so early in the morning, until now. Lydia was often out the door to head over to the ranch and help Deborah Brokken with getting breakfast and dinner ready for the men who were staying there. Rebecca had heard that many of the younger women in town had started doing the same, and a few matches were already in the works. With a frown, she looked at her brother. "Take your time. I'll get started on my own."

The truth was, she wanted a moment alone to decide how she would handle the situation with her sister and Mr. Wheeler. Despite her daydreams of what she'd do should she run into him again, Rebecca didn't expect to see Jake Wheeler again so soon. It was a shock when she headed out to the stables to feed the horses, and he stood there with two buckets of oats and handed her one.

"I fed the first row," he said by way of greeting.

She nodded, and they both began to take care of the horses together. While there was small talk, they managed to knock out the

job of caring for the horses faster than she could ever remember. Rebecca appreciated his work ethic, but mostly she enjoyed how easy the morning was with him. Not only was his help making the job go by faster, but they fell into a routine without explanation or guidance. She felt comfortable with Jake in a way she'd never felt around anyone else. Her mind, her posture—everything was relaxed when he was around. Except for her heart that was still pounding every time she caught him staring at her. Could that mean what she thought it did? It wouldn't be so farfetched, she told herself... after all, he was here to marry one of the women of the town.

Noah joined them toward the end with a yawn. If he wasn't feeling well, maybe he should have stayed inside. She lifted a brow at him as he grabbed hold of the wheelbarrow and took off toward the compost heap. She then turned toward Mr. Wheeler as he returned from turning out Lucky.

"You didn't have to do all this," Rebecca said as they were finishing up the morning chores. She knew she should be thanking him, but she felt a bit guilty. She could have managed on her own.

"It was my pleasure, miss." Jake looked into her eyes, and lifted a hand toward her face, but made a fist and pulled away. "You have a bit of something on your cheek."

Her eyes went wide, and she brushed her cheek, so glad it was a piece of hay and not manure.

"Was so glad to see you this morning, Jake," Noah said, returning with the wheelbarrow. "Thanks for coverin' for me. Had you not been here, poor Rebecca would'a been doin' all the work."

"We couldn't have that, now, could we?"

Rebecca stood tall. "I could have managed just fine on my own." She shot Noah a teasing glance and said, "If you need more rest, I can take up the slack."

Noah frowned. "No need. I'm fine."

"Noah is a good, strong man. And doesn't seem the type to let his sister do all his work for him." Jake patted Noah's shoulder and walked off with him, leaving Rebecca to ponder her feelings and fears of what her sister would think.

After all, Lydia had claimed dibs on Mr. Wheeler. And when Lydia claimed dibs on anything, it all but belonged to her. Rebecca recalled a time when their father had brought home two lovely dresses – a purple one that Rebecca knew would fit her perfectly and was clearly meant for her, but Lydia called dibs. When trying to explain to her that the dress was for Rebecca, Lydia started crying and creating a fuss, until finally, both of their parents gave in, and Rebecca was left with a yellow dress that didn't quite fit right and wasn't nearly as pretty as the dress Lydia took from her. Or the same with the dolls her

mother made – Lydia screamed out which one she wanted, leaving Rebecca with whatever was left. That was how their relationship had always been, and though Rebecca was bitter sometimes about it, she tolerated it because she loved her sister. But she couldn't help but wonder if she let herself, could she fall for Mr. Wheeler? And if so, what then?

Chapter 6

Rebecca decided to go for a walk before supper. She needed to take a step back and clear her mind. She was uncertain whether Mr. Wheeler was so nice to her at the livery because of the work or if he truly took an interest in her. The fact was that he didn't need to have regular conversations with her. He knew his way around the stables already, and all the chores came naturally to him. But he still smiled her way and they'd laughed together. She hadn't smiled so much in five years. And that was the reason for her walking now. Because if she wore this smile to the kitchen table, Lydia would be sure to suspect something. Before she cleared her mind, she also wanted to bask in the memory of Mr. Wheeler – the way his body moved and how at ease he was around the horses.

On her walk, Rebecca passed a few of the other men. She knew they would all make suitable enough husbands, and marriage was not only about love. Sometimes it was about convenience and survival. She knew that, as much as it pained her to accept that truth. In the case of their dying town, survival was a key aspect in choosing a mate. She knew there was something more desirable than simple continuity with Mr. Wheeler and she wanted to get to know him better. He seemed so kind and understanding, even to Noah. She could picture him as an older brother. She wanted to know his story. Why was he here in Brokken, and where was his family? Did he miss them? What had the war done to him? She could see a darkness in his eyes, and the way he'd flinch when he heard a loud noise. Each time, she wanted to reach out to him, but for the sake of polite behavior and fear of alarming him further, she'd tucked her hands in her pockets and said a quick prayer for control over herself. She just wanted him to know he was safe with her, but she'd yet to figure out why that thought had become important to her in such a short time.

Those serious thoughts stayed with Rebecca as she finished her walk through town and started for home. When she finally returned to the house, she quickly realized she was late. Instead of getting rid of her wicked grin and not being badgered by Lydia for it, she was even more suspect. Everyone was already seated at the table at various

stages of eating.

"Sorry, the—" Rebecca stumbled, trying to think of an excuse better than the truth.

"The horses were worked up today," Noah said for her. "She wanted to make sure everything was fine."

Rebecca blinked at her brother while her shoulders relaxed. He had to be the only one in the house who might have known about her feelings for Mr. Wheeler. And he had to have heard about Lydia's feelings since it was all she talked about lately. Did this mean that he supported her? Then Rebecca spotted that Lydia was already done with her plate of food.

"Enjoy supper," she said to Rebecca with a wink and headed towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Momma and Rebecca said at the same time.

"Just for a walk." She smiled.

"Since when does she go for walks this late?" Momma asked, brows furrowed.

"Since we've had a group of men delivered at our doorstep," Rebecca said, bitterness creeping into her voice.

"Oh!" Momma smiled. "That's good then!"

"Yes, very good." Rebecca grabbed a plate and ignored the rest of the discussion and ate her meal as the others slipped away.

She couldn't help but wonder who Lydia might encounter on her walk. Would she win the attentions of Mr. Wheeler? She hoped not. Catching her thoughts, she chastised herself. This isn't right, she thought. She shouldn't be behaving or thinking in such a way. But there she was, hoping and praying with her whole heart that somehow things might work out with Rebecca and the gentleman from Atlanta. If only Lydia could see beyond him and notice one of the other guys. But, she knew that was unlikely. She had her sights set on Mr. Wheeler. Lydia would get him; she always did.

Overwhelmed and conflicted with her emotions, after Rebecca had her meal, she grabbed a book from her father's shelf and started reading while sitting on the porch. She made a tall cup of sweet tea and sipped on it as she flipped each page, and got lost in a life much different than her own. A life where good won and evil lost. Perhaps a world where her sister wouldn't try to take the one man who'd stolen her heart in such a short time. She only wished such a world existed, and the moment she did she was filled with guilt. Why couldn't this just be simple? Why should it be so hard? She had no idea, but she knew she needed to stop thinking of him. If only it was that easy.

JAKE WAS HEADING BACK to the ranch when he spotted his bunkmate walking towards him. He didn't want to deal with any suspicions or arguing about where he stood in the war. Not now. Not when his mind was still reeling from spending the day with Rebecca. He wanted to bask in the simplicity of those moments, not be faced with the complex nature of his past. A past that had haunted his every moment until he met Rebecca—she let him forget.

He spun around and met a bright wide-eyed face standing right before him.

“Oh, goodness!” Lydia said, her eyes wide. “I am so sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you.”

He measured his breath, steadying his racing heart. “I don't imagine you did. What can I do for you, miss?”

Lydia blushed. “I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to take a lady on a walk?”

“A what?” Jake shook his head. He hadn't expected an actual request, but he'd be foolish to deny a beauty such as Lydia a simple request, especially given his current situation. He had no idea if Rebecca even liked him. She wasn't the typical girl who batted her eyelashes and giggled. She didn't go out of her way to touch him. It was always him. He was the one that waited for her appearance. Maybe she simply tolerated him, the same way he was tolerating Lydia now.

It wouldn't be the worst thing to be married to someone pretty, kind, and charming. And this girl, he could read like a book. Her eyes sparkled at him with anticipation of his answer. Shrugging, he nodded. “Sure, let's go for a walk.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wheeler.” She looped her arm through his without hesitation and started walking toward the garden on the side of the Brokken's house closest to town. He knew it was over a mile walk from here to the livery stable, but this girl was going out of her way to meet with him here. Rebecca hadn't. They walked toward the tall oak tree in the center of the garden and stood near it when they got there, looking at the flowers.

The scent of the lilies nearby reminded him of Rebecca and he felt a bit guilty for thinking of one girl while another had her hand upon his forearm. What was he doing here? Sure, Lydia was prettier than any girl who'd shown interest in him in five... maybe ten years. And all he could do was think about another girl. It wasn't fair to Lydia, nor would it be to Rebecca, if she knew. He let out a long, slow breath, and started guiding her away from the flowers and closer toward town. The sun was beginning to set, painting all the sky with golden hues. He slipped her arm from his. “It's getting late. Should I escort you back home, Miss Walsh?”

She blinked at him, looking up at him with wrinkles in her brow that reminded him that she was, in fact, Rebecca's sister. "Um, yes. Thank you."

He walked with her the mile or so back to the livery while the night all but sucked the light of the sun out of the sky. She had acted as though she'd wanted to resume her hold on his elbow once, but he pretended not to notice and slipped farther away from her with a half step to the side. He hated showing this level of rejection to such a pretty young woman, but it wasn't fair to her that he thought of another, even while looking at her face, a face that reminded him too much of her sister's.

When they neared the livery, Lydia stopped. "Thank you for escorting me home."

"My pleasure, Miss Walsh," he said, tipping his hat.

She smiled at him, but it looked strained and then she turned around before saying over her shoulder, "Good night."

He'd hurt her. Even though he'd been trying not to, he could tell he did. "Good night."

On his walk back to the Brokken Arrow Ranch and the bunkhouse, he peered up at Orion in the night sky. The sky looked the same here as it did in Atlanta, only somehow, bigger. His chest felt a little tight at the thought that he may have hurt Lydia's feelings, but he knew it was for the best. It wasn't Lydia's sweet mannerisms that he wanted. He wanted the safety and comfort that he felt when he was with Rebecca. The woman had made him feel at home for the first time since he'd left his at the start of the war.

When he neared the bunkhouse, he was relieved to find that the reason he'd accepted Lydia's invitation in the first place, avoiding Emmet Forest, had already climbed into his bunk and seemed asleep already. Jake sat on his bunk and pulled off his boots. In the war, he'd learned it was best to just leave his clothes on while he slept. He'd gotten into the habit, and it was a difficult one to break. But for once, he felt that maybe he'd be safe enough to get more comfortable here, even in this bunk house. Then he shook his head at how the thought had made his shoulders tense. He wasn't ready. He slipped under the rough blanket and tucked it up to his chin. Perhaps someday he would be, but it wasn't now.

Chapter 7

When Rebecca had spotted Lydia and a man walking together in the twilight, her heart sank to the pit of her stomach when she saw the tall form walk with a familiar limp. Mr. Wheeler was walking with Lydia through town. It shouldn't have hurt her as much as it did. It shouldn't have been a surprise. But she felt as though she'd been punched in the gut. She stood from the porch and snuck inside, hoping that they wouldn't catch sight of her. She knew how these kinds of walks usually ended. And the last thing she wanted to see right now was Mr. Wheeler kissing her sister.

Tears stung her eyes, but she swiped them away and steeled herself. She didn't need to cry over what could have been. It never was, and it was never going to be, if she was honest with herself. She slipped past her mother and Hannah who were crocheting together in the living room and rushed to the bedroom that she shared with Lydia and Hannah. She didn't bother lighting a candle, just left the door open and let the light from the living room cast a glow into the room. Then she dropped onto her bed in the shadows and just stared up at the ceiling with her father's book hugged to her chest.

No more tears came as she slowly began to accept her fate. She'd be a spinster, or she'd end up marrying one of the other men for convenience. The fantasy she had with Mr. Wheeler would come to an end tonight. Then, sooner than she'd expected, Lydia came rushing into the room, and threw herself onto her own bed.

Rebecca's heart raced as she sat up and looked at her sister who was bathed in the light from the doorway. She lay on her stomach with her arms wrapped around her pillow, where she'd buried her face. Then her sister made a pained sound.

"Uh-hmm." Rebecca cleared her throat.

Lydia bolted upright with a gasp and peered in the darkness at Rebecca. When she recognized her sister, she looked down. Tears streaked her cheeks. "Sorry."

Rebecca shook her head, her heart still racing. "Don't be sorry. What's going on?"

"I'm crying, you idiot!" Lydia's hands fisted in the hem of her

dress.

Ignoring her harsh behavior, Rebecca asked, "No. I mean, why?"

"Does it matter?" Lydia swiped at her cheeks as though her tears offended her.

Rebecca sighed, stood and lit the lantern on their dresser. She stepped across the room and lit the candle on their bedside table, too. She wanted to give her sister a moment to calm herself and went to close the door, so they could have some privacy. With a hand on the door, she nodded at Hannah and their mother who both were looking toward their room with eyebrows raised. Once the door was shut, she turned back to Lydia. "Of course, it matters. I care about what you care about, and if there's something I can help with..."

Lydia pushed closer to the wall and crossed her legs under her skirt. Then she relaxed her hands into her lap. "Well, I tried walking with one of the men and he... he ignored me. He didn't seem to care about me at all."

Mr. Wheeler ignored her? Rebecca's eyes went wide. "Lydia, the man only just met you. What do you expect? A proposal today?"

She blushed. "Well, not a proposal, but maybe for him to tell me I was pretty, at least. That's what all the men normally do."

Rebecca already knew that Mr. Wheeler wasn't like most men. "Not every man is the same, you know."

"I know. But I asked him to take me for a walk at the ranch. He did, but he seemed distracted and not just by the beauty of the garden. It was as if he didn't even notice me there, even though my hand was on his arm. He didn't tell me I was pretty, even while I waited for it. He didn't even talk to me at all. I expected him to prolong the walk, like most men did, but he didn't ask me to stay, he only asked if he could walk me home. Which he did, in silence. How could he not like me? What is wrong with me?"

Rebecca blinked at her sister. There had been no kiss, no twilight rendezvous. There hadn't even been the pleasant, natural conversation that Rebecca herself had been enjoying with Mr. Wheeler the past two days. And suddenly, Rebecca realized that this made her happy. But when she looked at her sister's sad, tear stained face, guilt flooded her. How could her sister's sadness make her happy? She felt like a terrible person.

"You're beautiful, and there's nothing wrong with you," Rebecca finally said and sat on the bed next to her sister. "Give it time. Trust me. I haven't seen a man yet who could resist you for long."

Lydia leaned her head on Rebecca's shoulder. "Why is this so hard? Why do I feel this way?"

"Love... or wanting to be in love... does funny things to us."

"Have you ever felt this way?" she asked.

Rebecca paused and thought. There were never many men around to feel like this for, and the only time she started feeling these feelings was recently—for Mr. Wheeler. She didn't want to lie to her sister, but the guilt flooded her and took over. "No," she whispered, a bit harshly. "Never."

"Not even for one of the guys here?" Lydia asked innocently.

"Not at all," Rebecca lied.

"Then how do you know?"

"I just do." She winked, patted her sister's head, and stood. She didn't feel comfortable in her lie and needed to put some distance between herself and her sister. She walked back over to her bed and grabbed her book.

"Are you reading that same book again?" Lydia asked, focusing on the tome in her hands.

"*Robinson Crusoe* was Papa's favorite," Rebecca said, pulling the book to her chest again as if hugging it was like hugging her father. "I read it when I miss him."

Lydia nodded and sighed. "I miss him, too."

They all did. Rebecca wondered how much more their mother must miss their Papa and their brother. If they felt so sad and broken over the loss of their family, how much more so their mother must have felt the burden and pain of their loss. Nevertheless, Momma held it together better than many of the other women in town did when losing their husbands and relatives to the war. She was a strong woman, but it seemed she was finally breaking. Something in her seemed to have snapped as of late—she cried more, worried too much, and frantically made her way through her days. Rebecca wanted to hug her and tell her to calm down, like she could with her sisters, but it seemed to so out of place with her mother. So, she kept her arms to herself and her words in her mouth, locked away tightly, though she wondered if her mother could benefit from some form of understanding. She wanted to tell her mother that she didn't have to be so strong and she didn't have to be perfect. They all still loved her.

But she could never seem to bring herself to say the words. She didn't know how to. She hoped one day she could. One day, maybe after they selected a spouse she could tell her mother. Maybe.

Chapter 8

The following day, Rebecca took Lucky for a ride down to the Brokken Ranch. She wanted Deborah to see how the young colt was doing, and if she was being honest with herself, she wanted to see Mr. Wheeler, since he didn't come that morning to help her with the chores. Noah had stopped sleeping in quite so much since he also seemed to enjoy spending time with Mr. Wheeler, and likely didn't want his sister to be alone with the man, even though Mr. Wheeler had been nothing but a gentleman.

When she got to the ranch, she found Deborah talking with Mr. Emmet Forest, one of the other men who was working the ranch and had answered the advertisement for husbands. Rebecca had nearly forgotten the other men since she hadn't been to the ranch in the days since they'd arrived.

"Wow. Is Lucky broke already?" Deborah asked when Rebecca jogged the gelding straight up to them and stopped.

"He's not perfect, but he's handling well. I brought him by, so you could see his progress and decide if you want me to keep working him on steering and stopping and listening to rider cues, or if you'd rather one of the men here take over and get him started with the cattle?" Rebecca dismounted the young colt.

Deborah rubbed the chestnut gelding's forehead, her eyes getting a dreamy look in them. The colt had to remind Deborah of her brother more than just about anything else. The colt was born the year her two oldest brothers left for the war. Fritz had stayed behind and raised the colt himself for more than a year before joining his brothers. When the three of them returned, Fritz loved the colt like he always did, but didn't really seem to have the heart to train the gelding himself. He let the colt sit, unbroke, until he was five years old, which was fine, but Deborah wanted to see the colt do more. Rebecca wondered if she hoped to show Fritz how well-trained Lucky was when he got back. She could imagine the young girl would want to do just that. Rebecca would want to do it if the colt had been Dan Junior's.

"Do you think I could ride him? Is he broke enough?" Deborah

asked, hope filling her shiny eyes.

A lump formed in Rebecca's throat as she nodded. "Of course."

Mr. Forest helped Deborah to mount the colt and stood back with Rebecca as they watched Deborah take him for laps around the field. The sight of it made Rebecca feel proud.

"So, you're one of the Walsh sisters, who run the livery?"

Rebecca blinked at the sound of the man's deep voice. She shook her head, chiding herself for her manners. She put out a hand for the man to shake. "Yes, sir. I'm Rebecca Walsh. Feel free to call me Rebecca."

Emmet was a shorter man, not much taller than Rebecca herself, but he was all lithe muscle, like a buck. He smiled at her, and took her hand in his giving it a hearty shake that pleased her. "A pleasure to meet you, Miss Rebecca. I'm Emmet Forest, and feel free to call me Emmet."

Heat rushed to her cheeks, but she nodded. "The pleasure is mine, too, Mr. Emmet."

For another long moment, they were silent, watching Deborah and the colt. Every now and then, Rebecca would shoot a glance toward the bunkhouse or toward the hay fields where the men were working on planting alfalfa. She hoped to spy Mr. Wheeler, but never seemed to get lucky enough to catch sight of him.

"You seem distracted, Miss Rebecca?" Mr. Emmet asked.

"Oh." Her chest tightened. He'd noticed her preoccupation. "I'm just thinkin' about how I need to get back soon to my Momma is all. She's been so overwhelmed these days."

She'd gotten too used to lying. That one had slipped out of her mouth almost faster than she'd thought it. Shame heated her cheeks.

"Is your mama doin' well then?" he asked.

She let out a slow breath and nodded. "Always is. She's a strong woman." Then she changed the course of the conversation. She kept her focus on the man beside her instead of letting her eyes wonder. "What about you? Where is your family?"

He hung his head low. "My parents were killed during a robbery recently."

"Oh," she whispered, kicking herself for asking. "I didn't know."

"It's fine," he said, a small smile tugging his sad lips. "See, at first I was really mad. How could this happen? Who could do such a cruel thing? I decided from then on to always stand up for the oppressed. Normally, I wouldn't be the type of guy to respond to the ad you lovely ladies put out." He winked. "But, I know your town is suffering from the Brokken brothers running away with the money from your town. It's not fair. I'm here to help you folks in any way I can."

Shocked by his response, she nodded respectfully. Though she still

had her heart set on Mr. Wheeler, she had to admit that Emmet wasn't a bad man. Perhaps her sister might choose him? She could only hope.

"Thank you for being so open with me," Rebecca said. An open, honest man was refreshing. It was how she'd always prided herself as being until she'd started to try to hide her feelings about Mr. Wheeler. She really needed to stop thinking so much about him. It wasn't helping her heart, or—Lord help her—her soul.

Mr. Emmet nodded and tipped his hat. "My pleasure."

A loud scream pierced the air, and both their eyes shot toward Deborah, thinking she must have fallen. But the young lady was still up on her horse, loping around the field. They both blinked at each other. Mr. Emmet's brow wrinkling like she imagined hers did. Then another scream, and this time, they focused in on where it came from.

"The garden." Rebecca's heart sank. Her sisters had said something about coming to the farm for a picnic and there was a ring of familiarity in that scream. She ran toward the oak at the center of the garden, where she spotted two figures.

Mr. Emmet followed her but veered off momentarily. When she reached her sisters, she saw what the problem was immediately. A rattlesnake sat not far from the blanket where their picnic basket was. They'd both managed to stand and slowly backed away.

"It's a rattler," Rebecca whispered between gasps for breath.

"What are we going to do?" Hannah asked, looking at Rebecca.

"Be very quiet. And very still," Lydia answered, her breath shaky.

"Keep backing slowly away, toward me," Rebecca answered at almost the same time.

They both managed one step before the rattler coiled up, its eyes fixed on them both, its tail lifted and rattling. Hannah whimpered.

Emmet arrived next to her, panting and lifting the rifle, ready to shoot at the rattler. His hands shook with each breath he took.

Rebecca hissed at his unsteady hands. "You're gonna miss it and upset it with that aim. You need to catch your breath." She grabbed the gun from him hand. "Allow me."

She aimed carefully, her heart pounding, but a sense of calmness washed over her. She could do this, she knew that. Besides if her sisters tried to leave now, the rattler was close enough to sense their vibrations. One bite and they could die. She took a slow breath and let it out as she pulled the trigger, hitting the snake square in the head.

Both her sisters squealed and hugged each other.

Emmet let out a whistle. "I've never seen anything quite like that."

"I have a good aim," Rebecca said nonchalantly, returning the gun to Emmet.

Lydia walked up and hugged her sister. "Oh Becca, I'm so sorry that we've been fighting. I love you so much. You are so amazing, and

you will make a lovely wife, I just know it.”

Hannah smiled and rested her head on Rebecca’s shoulder. Rebecca blinked at her sisters. Had she been fighting with Lydia? There’d been tension, but not words, if she admitted it to herself. Maybe Lydia had felt the tension, too.

“I’m glad you all are fine,” Emmet said, a blush creeping upon his cheeks as he eyed her sisters. “I’m glad we heard your screams. I was out for a walk this morning, hunting some quail, so I knew where the rifle was and grabbed it when I saw you two ladies in the garden.”

Rebecca nodded. “Thanks for that. Fast thinking.”

Lydia pulled away from her sister and smiled at Emmet. “Thank you for coming, though I am glad you let my sister have the rifle, though.” She winked, though her hands still wrung in front of her.

“My pleasure.” Emmet said, his voice a bit shaky and a blush still coloring his cheeks. “Would you like to go for a walk, miss?”

Lydia blinked at her sisters. Hannah’s arms were still around Rebecca’s waist. Rebecca swallowed, hoping that her sister would accept the man’s offer, but afraid to express her feelings.

Hannah nodded and waved toward the dead snake. “I’m fine. I’ll stay here with Rebecca and help her take care of that.”

Although Lydia’s brow crinkled, she nodded toward Emmet. “Of course. A walk would help me settle my nerves.”

As the duo slipped away, relief soothed Rebecca’s shoulders. Emmet was a good man, and it would be beyond Rebecca’s best hopes for a man like him to win her sister’s heart. She knew it was a selfish request, but she made a small prayer for it anyway.

“How are we going to pick that thing up?” Hannah asked, bringing Rebecca back to reality.

Rebecca sighed. “Take everything you brought and put it back in the basket. I’ll scoop it up with the blanket, dispose of it, and then we’ll need to wash the quilt.”

“I can take care of that,” Hannah said with a nod. And the two of them got to work.

Chapter 9

In the distance, Jake stood observing the whole event. He had been heading back to work after a short break, when he noticed Emmet hunting quail nearby. Then Emmet had set the rifle off to the side to help Miss Deborah with something. Jake started to head back toward the hay field when he saw Rebecca come riding up on the chestnut gelding, Lucky. Jake's heart had pounded in his chest at the sight of her, and he'd hoped at first that she'd come to see him, but she rode straight for Deborah and Emmet. Jake felt the pang of jealousy at the sight of the two of them standing and talking together. It was bad enough that he couldn't shake that man's presence, he didn't want Emmet to get any closer to Rebecca.

When the screams echoed through the air, Rebecca was the first to run, and Emmet veered off for the side of the bunkhouse where he'd left his rifle. Jake started following but hung back as he watched the scene unfold. He was proud of Rebecca as she confidently ripped the rifle away from Emmet and took her shot. He had never seen such confidence and grace—she was so well composed and ready to do whatever it took to protect her sisters.

Before anyone could see that he was watching, he slipped back to his work with the others in the hay field. As he walked, Jake decided his sights were officially set on Rebecca. The time he'd spent with Lydia earlier made him realize quickly that though she was a beauty, she was not the type of woman he could see himself spending the rest of his life with. She was kind and charming, but she lacked the spitfire that Rebecca possessed.

Rebecca was fearless and strong, and he saw that in her today as she took on that rattlesnake to protect her sisters. Jake knew he needed someone just as passionate as he was, and he could see that Rebecca was at his level. She was strong-willed and independent. He wanted to be wanted not just needed. Rebecca would never need a man. She would choose one she wanted, and that was the relationship he longed for. It might be foolish, but he knew he couldn't let the opportunity for a relationship like that slip by him. He had to find out if Rebecca liked him the way he did her, but he knew he couldn't push

the matter. Instead, he would return to the stable in the morning to help her with chores again and perhaps continue the pleasant, easy conversation that they had grown used to having.

As long as he steered the topics and didn't let things get too deep into his past, he'd be fine. He couldn't afford to have an episode. That's what he was scared of. The weight of his past might snuff their budding relationship, and he couldn't let that happen.



AFTER REBECCA HAD RETRIEVED Lucky from Deborah, she walked home leading the horse with her sisters. The girls decided not to tell their mother about the events with the snake as they knew it would only worry her. Besides, Hannah had reasoned with her sisters, they were all safe and fine. Why cause distress when everything was fine? To unwind, the girls decided to brew some tea and play a card game that their older brother Dan Junior had once taught them. It was a game he made up and the sort of game that girls typically didn't play. Their mother would frown upon it, so they sat in their room like when they were little, secretly playing the forbidden card game. It was a game about lying and keeping a strong poker face. One person was a "wanted robber" – whoever held the King of Spades. Thing was, no one else knew who that was.

"It's you, isn't it, Rebecca!" Hannah asked, laughter in her eyes.

"I bet it is!" Lydia whisper-shouted, lifting her eyebrow.

Rebecca eyed her sisters. She didn't have the King, but she couldn't tell for sure if it was Lydia or Hannah. Hannah had blamed her first, so she was the first suspect, but Lydia was usually the cunning one. Everyone continued to play their hand, accusing each other of being the one to rob the imaginary bank. The game ended, and Lydia sat down her final hand with a smile—no one had guessed it was her, and she won.

During the last round, the girls discussed the upcoming dinner, which men they hoped to speak with there and the dresses they'd wear. Lydia mentioned wearing one of Momma's dresses, a yellow one with an intricate bodice. Hannah mentioned a dress her and Momma were sewing together – a lovely pink number with white lace. Though Hannah was a bit younger than Rebecca and Lydia, they couldn't discount the possibility that she could have a suitor as well. Though Rebecca didn't much like that fact.

"You're such a good liar!" Hannah squealed at Lydia, as they collected the cards at the end of the game and got ready for another.

Lydia laughed. "Well, I had to play the part!"

"A little too well," Rebecca chimed in. "When you do rob that

bank, remember to share the loot!"

The girls giggled together and played another round. This time Hannah was the robber, but Lydia figured it out midway through and won the game again.

"Well, we better call it a night," Rebecca declared, stepping up in the parental role she'd been forced to after Papa and Dan Junior left. It was getting late. The oil lantern was flickering as though it had gotten low. And besides, both Momma and Noah had long since gone to bed.

"I suppose so," Lydia said with a yawn.

The girls each headed for their own bed, eager for what a new day would hold. Hopefully with no more snakes.



JAKE WOKE EARLY the following day and headed out for the stables before dawn was more than a gray light on the horizon. The first of April had arrived but the mornings were still breezy and cool. When he reached the livery, he was surprised to find Rebecca had already gotten a head start. The eastward-facing barn doors were wide open, letting in the sun as it the light grew.

"You're up early," he said as she came toward him with a bucket of oats.

She smiled and poured some into the first horse's feeder. "Just thought I'd beat ya to it."

Laughing, he said, "Well, good for you."

The two fell into their normal routine and began discussing his past working at his family's livery. He explained his love for horses and said it was something he'd always taken to easily. As they started discussing his past, Rebecca eyed him and chewed her lip for a second as though debating whether she should ask what was on her mind, but finally, she blurted, "Is your family still in Atlanta?"

"I'd rather not talk about that." Jake dropped the bale of hay he was holding on the ground and said a curse under his breath. He couldn't look up at her for half a moment as a frown tugged his lips downward.

A cry escaped Rebecca's lips, forcing him to look up. She had tripped and sent a shelf of metal bits towering down right beside him.

His heart thundered, and his ears rang at the sounds of metal hitting metal and even the cry. The sounds reminded him of the many cries he'd heard in battle, and suddenly he was transported to a bloodier, darker time. As if through a tunnel, he could hear her voice asking, "Oh my goodness. Are you all right?"

But he couldn't answer. It felt as though he had a mule sitting on his chest. Breathing had become impossible, much less speaking. But

he tried and tried to escape the darkness that had flooded his vision. He tried to close his eyes against the onslaught of death that paraded before him. He grew lightheaded as he attempted to breathe but couldn't draw in breath. He fought the muck and the shadows of memories. He fought for his life and the right to draw breath. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he finally started breathing, but his breath was shallow and short.

"Mr. Wheeler?" she said again, probably for the third or fourth time. He'd lost count along with his ability to respond

He sank to his knees. His breath slowly getting easier to take. The weight on his chest lifted bit by bit and allowed him to breathe evenly. Then he noticed the feeling of her hands on his arm and shoulder. And when he opened his eyes, she was kneeling on the ground beside him, her eyes worried and her smile, small.

"When I was a little girl," Rebecca said, her voice shaking, "Papa would take me and Dan Junior hunting. Lydia never wanted to go. Hannah and Noah were too small. I loved how excited Papa'd get when he caught something. One day, he finally started teaching me how to hunt like him. I remember when I shot my first quail." Rebecca drew a deep breath, tears filling her eyes. "I cried," she whispered. "I was so afraid that he was gonna be mad at me for crying."

Her voice was soothing something deep inside him, and the ache he suddenly felt in his chest wasn't for his own pain, it was empathy for hers. "Was he mad?"

"No. He said that all life is precious and to never stop caring. He said it was fine to care. That's what makes us human, Mr. Wheeler. And you," she reached out to touch his cheek, "are one of the most amazing humans I've ever met. Don't ever doubt that."

His heart sank, and he blinked at her. She was offering hope he wasn't able to take yet. He shot up to his feet and held out his hand to Rebecca. He pulled her to her feet, and, on a whim, he wrapped her in a tight hug. She smelled heavenly, like cinnamon and leather. He wanted to hold her forever, but instead he let her go and spun on his heel away from her. "I'd best be on my way."

"Mr. Wheeler?" she called after him.

His step faltered at the door of the barn, but he didn't look back to her. "I don't want to talk about it, right now. I'm not ready."

Her voice wavered and sounded broken. "I'll leave you be then. Stay safe, please."

He turned slightly, tipped his hat to her, and walked away.

Chapter 10

Breathless and blinking after Mr. Wheeler, Rebecca was left with her thoughts, and though her heart broke for him—for whatever memory he had been living in, she was grateful she had been there with him. It filled her heart with warmth to know she was able to at least provide some comfort for him. She knew she had done the right thing, but she wanted to do more. She wanted to open the pages of his book, carefully turning each page with a light caress. He didn't know, but she could handle his story. Each sentence. Each word. She wanted to know it all.

For the rest of that day, Rebecca took extra care to appreciate her family and the favorable hand she had been dealt. She helped Momma and Hannah in the kitchen, while Lydia sat with a cup of tea and stared longingly out the window.

"Come join us," Rebecca suggested with a smile. "I know you love kneading the dough."

Lydia shook her head. "I do, but I just feel... Well," she said then laughed, "I don't know what the word is."

"What is it like?" Rebecca asked, taking a seat by her.

"I miss things. Things from the past. But I'm not sad. Like, you know, I miss Papa... but it's not grief."

"It's melancholy," Hannah said, sitting beside her two sisters. "Teacher taught me that word."

"I like that word," Lydia said. "It sounds like melody."

"Mm," Rebecca murmured and nodded. She reached out to pull Hannah near her into a hug. "You're so smart. When did you get so smart?"

"I don't know." She giggled and shrugged in Rebecca's arms.

The sisters joined Momma in the kitchen and together they prepared the supper and the side dishes for Lydia to take to the Brokken Ranch the next day. Then they enjoyed the meal together with Noah, remembering the happy times with Papa and Dan Junior, laughing at the old stories and keeping their reminiscences fond. They all went to bed around the same time, but Rebecca lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling in the darkness, unable to sleep.

Eventually, she snuck out in the middle of the night, not because she had some secret tryst or something to hide, but because when she closed her eyes, she saw Jake suffering. It pained her heart far too much. She could hardly bear it in the moments she had to earlier, and to have it on replay in her mind made it impossible to sleep. She headed to the stables, and Lucky nickered at her in greeting. Despite his occasionally testy behavior, he was fast becoming her current favorite to ride. They were so much alike. She reached over and petted his nuzzle. "Hey boy, you wanna go for a ride?" she whispered.

The horse neighed gently. She nodded and left to grab his saddle to groom and tack him up. As she did so, she could have sworn she saw a light on in the house. Was Momma awake? She hoped not. She hoped no one had noticed her missing. Just as she sent out a silent prayer up, the light went out. She continued to saddle up Lucky and led him out of the stable. She mounted him, and he scooted away, feeling her excitement. She had no intention for this to be a slow ride. No. She was going to run away from each fear and doubt, letting the horse's nature guide them through the night.

She expected Lucky to hold back at first, or to maybe pitch a fit over such a late-night ride, but the horse seemed to understand Rebecca in that moment. He seemed to feel her pain in a way no one else could, and she felt the horse knew she needed this, and so he ran. They went as fast as possible, zipping through not only the pasture at the livery but the town and the woods. She could finally feel her mind slow down and her soul relax, though her heart was pounding with adrenaline. When they reached the lake, Rebecca stopped Lucky and hopped off.

She held his reins and allowed him to tug at the grass and to reach the water and grab a drink. She took off her shoes and dipped her toes into the freezing lake. The cold shocked her body and grounded her.

Everything was gonna be fine, she told herself. Jake was gonna be fine, but she worried that he wouldn't be. She worried what his episode meant for their friendship. Would they recover from the incident and be all right?

On the way back, she felt better about the incident, but overall, she had to admit, she was terrified of her feelings in general. Though she longed for Mr. Wheeler, that longing scared her. Not just because of her sister's interest in the man, but because her own interest was foreign and terrifying. She struggled to let people in, because she had lost so many people in her life. She always was a strong person, but she had been forced to grow up fast. She knew if she didn't, Hannah and Noah certainly wouldn't. Their momma was always a frantic mess, and someone had to keep things in check. Much like the men that had arrived in their town broken, so was Rebecca in her own,

small way.

Once she'd bedded down Lucky for the night, Rebecca returned to the house, entering slowly from the back door and tiptoeing across the floor until she reached the bedroom she shared with her sisters.

"Out for a late-night ride again?" Lydia whispered as Rebecca sat down on her own bed.

Rebecca's heart jumped, but she settled it down and nodded. "I couldn't sleep."

"Neither can I." Lydia answered, sitting up from the bed she shared with Hannah and moving over to the one where Rebecca sat and leaned against her shoulder.

Rebecca wrapped an arm around her. "At least we can keep each other company."

After slipping on her night gown, Rebecca lay in her bed with Lydia, listening to her sister's thoughts about their mother, their future, and the dreams they hoped to accomplish, until their eyes grew heavy and their minds exhausted. Words came out more jumbled, less meaningful.

"I believe in you," Lydia whispered.

"Me, too, silly." Rebecca laughed quietly.

"No, I mean it. I believe in you."

Before Rebecca could question what exactly that meant, Lydia started snoring softly and her own eyes grew heavy and a darkness consumed her.

When morning came, Rebecca woke on her own and left Lydia sleeping in her bed. With a yawn she dressed and headed out to tend to the farm a little later in the morning than usual for her. She reached the stables, expecting to see part of the work already done, but much to her dismay she found nothing finished. Noah was just carrying a bucket of water in. Though he wasn't yet there, Rebecca still expected Mr. Wheeler to show up. It had become a routine of sorts, and she had grown used to it.

But the day continued on. And though she finished her chores in a slow, tired haze, he never arrived. Just as she was cleaning up the last stall, she found tears welling in her eyes.

For a few moments, she let them fall and then swiped them from her face. No, she thought. She couldn't let herself stoop to this. No man would ever cause her to break. Ever.

Days passed and for whatever reason, Mr. Wheeler didn't return to the stables to help in the mornings. They crossed paths once when she came back by the ranch with Lucky, but he had simply waved at her from a distance and continued on his way. It felt like he was avoiding her. She frowned and turned away, leaving him alone.

More men arrived in town in answering the advertisement, and the

dinner at the hotel was soon approaching. Rebecca started to consider not attending. She had too much work to do.

In the mornings, instead of Jake's assistance, it was just Rebecca and her little brother again. Noah took charge and cared for the horses as they had before the arrival of the men.

"He'll come around," Noah said knowingly one day. The words stopped her heart, but she collected herself.

"Who?" Rebecca asked, pretending she didn't notice Jake's absence.

"You know who."

She let her head hang low. She did. All too well, she knew who she was missing right now. A lonely melancholy swept over her, just as it had Lydia earlier that week, though for a far different reason. She missed her friend, and in that moment, she realized how fond she had grown of Mr. Wheeler. He was indeed her friend, even if he was avoiding her. She knew that it had to be because of his earlier episode and only hoped that he would realize there was nothing to be ashamed of. She thought of visiting him, but she knew it wasn't appropriate. Her mind urged her to give him space, but her heart longed to have things go back to the way they had been.

Chapter 11

M*en don't cry.*

Jake's father always told him that, and he knew that men such as himself, especially, should not cry. He had never let anyone see him in such a vulnerable state, let alone a lady whose attention he was vying for. Even though she handled his moment of weakness in a graceful fashion, sharing the closest thing in her past that compared to this. Though he knew that she was aware her experience couldn't ever truly compare to what he had gone through, she tried. She tried to keep him grounded and pull him out of his darkness. He'd forever appreciate that, but at the same time, he was horrendously ashamed. That is not a woman's job, his father would say – and Jake didn't disagree, but something inside him longed for the comfort that Rebecca selflessly offered him. But, it wasn't right. It was too selfish.

He knew Rebecca would notice his absence from the stable in the mornings, and he felt terribly guilty. He just couldn't face her yet. Didn't want to have her pity. Didn't want to deal with any questions she might have. Whether it was the pride instilled in him by his father or the dread of her rejection, he didn't know. What he did know was that the dinner at the hotel, the official gathering of the men and women, was tonight and it filled him with a sick, anxious excitement.

"Something wrong?" Emmet interrupted Jake's thoughts, a knowing look in his eyes that put Jake even more on edge.

He sat tall and then hopped off his bunk. "Everything is fine. Just thinkin' about tonight is all."

"Tonight," Emmet repeated. "Oh, that's right. We, the leftover men who don't have matches, get to be paraded among the women folk tonight."

"It's better than the alternative," Jake mumbled.

"And what would that be?"

He cursed himself and shook his head. "Nothing." Without another word, he walked outside of the bunkhouse. He needed to get out and take a long walk to clear his head. He ended up near the livery and spotted Rebecca. She couldn't see him, but he saw her head hanging low as Noah spoke consolingly to her. Could he possibly have such an

effect on her? Maybe he was simply misreading the situation from afar.



THE NIGHT of the dinner party had arrived, and Hannah and Lydia were in their room applying blush, lipstick, and putting their hair up in curls. They did their best to get Rebecca to sit still while they did the same to her, but Rebecca wasn't used to so much pampering and makeup. Momma walked in. "Oh, my girls!" she said, waving her hands in the air. "You look lovely. You're all grown up now, I'd say."

"Thank you, Momma." Lydia kissed her on the cheek. "We feel all grown up, don't we, Becca?"

"Sure enough." Rebecca smiled, her lips feeling waxy.

Hannah nodded in agreement, giving Rebecca an amused smile. That smile said a lot... leaving Rebecca to wonder if they'd made her up like a clown.

Their momma came over and kissed Rebecca on the forehead, informing them that she was about to get ready as well. "I just wanted to tell you girls that you are all very lovely and I am proud to be your momma."

Lydia smiled and wrapped her mother in a hug. "We are proud to be your daughters."

Rebecca, Hannah, and Lydia didn't have the finest clothes in Brokken, let alone Texas, but they each had a few dresses that were exceptionally made. Rebecca wore a fine dark red dress with simple, delicate flowers embroidered upon the bodice. It was modest in its design, but still allowed her few curves to be accentuated. She had only worn the dress once before, at a cousin's wedding, and she was pleased to be wearing it again. She felt like a princess in the stories her Papa would tell her about.

Lydia wore a pale yellow dress with a dark green design on the bodice of gown. On her neck, Momma had placed the pearls their father had given her when they first got married. "And these," Momma had said, while putting the pearl earrings in place. "You look beautiful."

It was only a short walk to the hotel from the livery, and they were escorted by their mother and Noah. Once inside, Rebecca and Lydia silently took in each man's appearance. Though upon their initial arrival, the men were worn down and a bit worse for wear, each man wore a fine suit and had hope in their eyes. Though all the men were handsome in their attire, Rebecca found that both her and Lydia's gazes had settled on a single man: Mr. Jake Wheeler. Momma, Noah, and Hannah sat at the table with Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Emmet Forest.

Momma waved them over and Rebecca noticed her place card was sitting next to Mr. Wheeler. Delighted and anxious to see if he'd speak to her, she sat beside him. He and the other man stood as the two girls sat down, Lydia taking her place in between Hannah and Noah.

Mr. Wheeler instantly greeted Rebecca as if nothing had ever happened. "You look lovely," he said and turned to the rest of the women at the table. "All of you."

Rebecca thought that perhaps she had been foolish to think that his absence was because of her. Perhaps he was busy. It was just that their last encounter was so powerful and raw—how could he not say something after that? She had so much to say. Smiling gently, she greeted Mr. Wheeler and the others at the table. Lydia's eyes, wide and admiring, stared at Mr. Wheeler. Before Rebecca could react, Mr. Wheeler started asking about the horses, even naming each individual one. "How's Lucky doing?" he asked.

Rebecca laughed and caught a jealous glare being shot at her from across the table by Lydia. Instantly, she was flooded with guilt. Her voice quieter than before, she responded self-consciously, "Oh, he's fine. He's behaved well for me today. I took him for a ride the other day"

"Oh?"

"Yeah, it was great."

"Glad to hear it." He offered her a genuine smile, but he raised his eyebrows. Clearly, he had picked up on the shift in her tone and posture. Yet another thing for Rebecca to feel guilty about. She sighed and started eating at her dinner.

"So, Mr. Wheeler, you must tell me about yourself." Lydia entered the conversation, a flirtatious grin and a sparkle in her eye.

Though Mr. Wheeler did not take notice of Lydia's attempts, someone else at the supper table did: Emmet. His eyes were glued to Lydia as she spoke to Mr. Wheeler, watching her hands as they gestured the events of each story she told him.

Once the supper was over, the dancing began, and Lydia was quite the popular attraction for many of the gentlemen at the dance. It seemed she had her pick of almost anyone she wanted. So why had she chosen Mr. Wheeler out of all of them?

"Do you wish to dance?" Mr. Wheeler leaned toward her, his eyes shining.

Her own eyes widened. "Um. I honestly don't know how."

His smile grew. "I'd be willing to trip along with the music with you if you're willing."

She laughed, took his offered palm and joined him for what could almost be called dancing, but instead ended up with a lot of stepping on each other's toes and laughing. When the song ended, they both

clapped their hands and laughed their way back to the table.

"You're right, dancing might not be right for either of us," Mr. Wheeler said.

"Seemed to be so."

I shouldn't be attracted to him, Rebecca thought, but she couldn't seem to help herself.

"Ma'am," Emmet said, his voice thick with worry. "Are you alright?"

Rebecca glanced over to see what he meant and found her mother with tears streaming down her face. She quickly stood and came to her mother's side.

"Momma?"

Her mother waved at her, but then sobbed harder. Watching her broke Rebecca's heart and made tears sting the backs of her eyes.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Mr. Wheeler asked, his brow furrowed

Rebecca looked around. Noah, Hannah, and Lydia were all busy with others. It wasn't a far walk home. Almost literally across the street from the hotel. She shook her head at Mr. Wheeler. "I'll just escort my mother home."

Her mother shook her head, standing. "No, honey. You stay here. I'll walk home on my own."

Rebecca frowned and looped an arm with her mother's. "Absolutely not. I'll take you home."

Her mother's wide eyes met hers, and she shook her head slowly this time. "Only if you promise me that you'll come back to the party after you escort me home."

"I promise." Rebecca sighed and led her quietly away from the dinner and to their home.

She took her momma all the way to her mother's room and helped her get settled into bed.

"Is it Papa?" she asked as she pulled the covers over her mother's lap.

Momma nodded. "I suppose that is part of it," she said, choking on her tears.

"I miss him too, Momma. We all do."

"I know. He was a fine man. I worry for you. All of you."

"What do you mean?"

Momma shook her head and forced a smile. "Never you mind," she said. "Go back to the dance. I'll be fine."

Rebecca nodded obediently and left her mother behind, though she felt as if she should stay. Once she returned to the hotel, her eyes immediately searched for Mr. Wheeler of their own accord. And what she found was he and Lydia, sitting close together, their heads leaned

together while they spoke. Rebecca's heart sank in her stomach.

Chapter 12

Jealousy weighed heavy in Rebecca's chest, leaving her with a sick, dark cloud hanging over her heart and mind. She stood tall and decided to let things play out as they would. Whatever happened would happen, she told herself. She would talk to Emmet, who now sat in the corner of the room. Rebecca took a seat beside him and greeted Emmet. She needed to put distance between herself and Jake. If she kept focusing on him, there was a risk of getting hurt. He may not even have felt the same way about her, and it was good to keep her options open. Emmet seemed like a fine gentleman, strong and capable of caring for a wife and family. He was sensitive—the first to notice her mother's shift in mood. Besides, if she only focused on Jake, that'd make her just like Lydia. While knowing what she wanted and going after it worked for her sister, Rebecca knew that tactic didn't always work for herself.

Emmet and Rebecca discussed everything from the weather, politics, the livery, her favorite horses, and the current state of her town.

"So, you took Lucky for a ride, eh?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I did. He's young and green and a little complicated, but he rides well, and he's got quite the personality."

"Does Lydia ride as well?" he asked.

"Oh, heavens no! She wouldn't get on a horse if it meant savin' her life."

"She seems kind."

Rebecca was stricken. Had she made her sister sound stuck-up? "She is," Rebecca said. "One can't help but love her." She couldn't help but notice Emmet's cheeks had turned red.

He liked Lydia. She wondered if her sister knew.

"I hope we can build this place back up," she said with a wistful tone as she leaned back in her chair and looked around the hotel dining room.

There were only about five men who hadn't yet found matches among the women in town, and when she counted the women, there were nine, including Hannah. And not every single woman was there.

Not even Abby the doctor, or Sheriff Victoria were present. And even though they hadn't yet found matches, were the men planning to stay? Was Emmet happy to be here? Rebecca couldn't help but wonder if he struggled with being here, along with the rest of the men, because, had roles been reversed, she'd miss home very much.

"So, tell me. How have you been liking Brokken so far?" Rebecca asked Emmet.

He smiled. "Well, I suppose it's been an experience. I enjoy the weather and the people are kind. Good folks out here, always so helpful."

"They are. Have you met my brother yet?" she asked, nodding her head in Noah's direction, though he was too far away to hear them or join in on their conversation.

"I've seen him around, yes. We met for a bit on the way to the ranch from the train station. He's a nice kid." He smiled at her brother.

"If you ever need anything, he's happy to help."

"Glad to hear it. What about you? What do you think of Brokken?"

She laughed. That was a strange turn of topic. "Well, I've lived here forever. I love it. It's my home, and I'd hate to have to leave it."

He nodded knowingly. "I know what that's like."

Forcing her voice to sound upbeat and happy, she asked, "Where are you from anyway?"

"Uh," he let out a long breath and looked around the room. "Sorry, I need to attend to some business. We'll continue this conversation later?"

She nodded, confused by his sudden change in demeanor. "Of course. Anytime."

He stood and left Rebecca alone in her thoughts and fears. She snuck a glance at Jake, who was still happily chatting away with Lydia. Taking a deep breath of her own, she decided to leave as well. She went out of the hotel and headed for the house just long enough to stop at the small shelf in the living room and pick out her favorite book to read. *Robinson Crusoe* was a book she had first read when he father went off to war, and it used to be his favorite. She felt closer to him when she held it in her hands. And while she read it, it was as if he was reading the words to her, guiding her not only through the book but through her life.

Carrying the book with her, she headed towards the stable. Before she allowed herself a moment's rest to read, she checked that each horse had plenty of hay and water. She set her book on a bale of hay while she topped off the water buckets. Exhausted with the work, Rebecca collapsed on the pile of hay and opened the book she brought with her. The words on the first page consoled her, wrapping her

heart in a big hug with promises of hope and love. And she felt fulfilled for a moment—her every need met.



JAKE NOTICED that not only Emmet had gone but so had Rebecca. Jealousy stained his thoughts, but he knew he was being ridiculous. Just as Rebecca's little sister Hannah and the proprietor of the hotel entered together with trays of baked sweets, and everyone flocked back toward the table, Jake slipped away from the crowd. He was happy to get away from Lydia, who'd occupied his time with her prattling while he waited for her to take a breath, so he could excuse himself from her. But that moment never happened. And what was he to do? Tell her to be quiet and let him talk to her sister? He wasn't rude and such an outright rejection would surely harm, not only his chances with Rebecca, but any other woman here.

When Rebecca had returned without her mother, she had sat with Emmet right away. Was that intentional? He couldn't be sure, but she began talking to Emmet before he could even ask her if everything was fine with her mother. Emmet, however, was blessed with the opportunity to show his concern for Rebecca and her mother. Why did it have to be Emmet? If there was anyone he didn't trust in Brokken, it was that man. An energy swirled in his chest, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets, as he slipped out the door of the hotel.

He walked out into the night and let out a low whistle. How life had changed in just a few short days.

He couldn't believe how fast events were unfolding, and he struggled to make sense of not only his current lot in life but who he was in relation to it. All he knew was that the longer he sat with Lydia, the more he thought about her sister. As he passed by the barn, a light shining inside caught his eye. He wondered who would be out there so late—no, he hoped he already knew. Grabbing the loop of his belt, he hesitated and then decided he ought to investigate. After all, what if it was a horse thief, and he just passed on by? One peek wouldn't hurt.

His heart stuttered when he saw Rebecca curled like a cat in a pile of hay, eyes wavering, as she held a book in her hand.

An ache filled his chest, stronger than anything he'd felt. A lump caught in his throat at the sight of her in such an intimate setting. Hay stuck out from her hair which was loose around her shoulders. Her burgundy dress fanned out across the pile of hay, and the lantern cast her in an angelic glow. He didn't dare say her name or make his presence known. This was one of those precious moments that didn't need to be ruined—a moment he knew he'd remember for the rest of

his life. Rebecca never looked so beautiful. Smiling after a few more minutes, he decided to walk away. As he turned, his leg gave, and he tripped over a bucket. The loud crash sent Rebecca jumping to her feet, and a gasp escaped her lips.

Chapter 13

Rebecca quickly recognized Mr. Wheeler, and before she could even fathom why he was there, she rushed to his aid. Kneeling, she offered him her hand.

His cheeks were flaming red, and he winced as he swatted at Rebecca's hand. "I'm fine," he snapped.

"Oh," Rebecca whispered, hurt by his reaction. "All right." She began to stand, but he grabbed her hand gently but firmly, pulling her closer to him.

"Sorry," he whispered leaning in toward her. "I just... hate for people to see me like this, especially you."

She held her breath. The light in the barn danced in his sad blue eyes which held all the troubles of the world. He licked the bottom of his lip, causing her eyes to be drawn there. Her heart thundered in her chest, and she felt lightheaded, but she didn't dare take a breath. He reached a hand toward her face, and she leaned toward it, hungry for his touch. She felt his breath on her face as their lips drew closer.

"Becca?" Lydia's voice echoed through the barn, and she pulled abruptly away from Jake. Rebecca panted to catch her breath. She looked up at Mr. Wheeler who had made it to his feet. His eyes were full of longing and apology.

"Night," he whispered as he disappeared in the direction opposite of Lydia.

Breathless, Rebecca stood up and forced a smile on her face just as Lydia stood before her. Her heart skipped a beat, and she could tell by the look of pure fury in her sister's eyes that Lydia had just witnessed the near-kiss between her and Jake. What should have been a happy memory had turned dark and became tainted with shame.

Rebecca blushed and awaited her sister's response. Lydia stood silent for a moment and then raised her voice. "What on God's green Earth was that? How could you disrespect me like this, Rebecca?"

Lydia spat her name. She hardly ever called her Rebecca. She was always Becca to her younger sister. She cringed from the verbal slap to the face, and started to talk but Lydia raised her hand, stopping her.

"You know what. Don't. Don't even try to defend yourself. You

knew I liked him, and of all the other men, you choose him? Behind my back?"

"Lydia—"

"No. No, Rebecca. You don't get a say in this. Don't speak to me." Turning on her heel, Lydia stormed off.

Rebecca's knees buckled, and she collapsed to the barn floor, watching her sister's shadow recede. Instead of finding comfort in the words of her father's book, she simply clutched it to her chest and silently begged heaven to fix her mistake.



BUT HEAVEN DID NOT TAKE any extraordinary measures to undo Rebecca's near-kiss with Mr. Wheeler, much to her dismay and joy. The feel of his breath on her lips plagued her dreams and haunted her mind, and though she kept an eye out for him, he hadn't returned to helping at the stables in the mornings. What had changed? Did he no longer want to kiss her? No, she chastised herself, it didn't matter. Lydia had claimed him, and there was nothing she could do about it. Not without hurting her sister even more than she already had.

For days, Lydia pointedly ignored her and if her sister did dare glance her way, it was with venom in her stare. It pained Rebecca, and it wasn't lost on Noah, Hannah, or Momma. How could anyone miss this shift between sisters who were once as close as two peas in a pod.

"Lydia," Rebecca said on the third day, exasperated.

But her sister stood, facing the opposite direction, pretending not to notice.

"Look," Rebecca said finally. "You can't ignore me forever. I made a mistake." But as she said the words, she knew it was a lie. If she could go back in time, if she could speed things along, she would have kissed Mr. Wheeler. She chose him in a way that Lydia hadn't, but she didn't know how to explain that to her sister.

Lydia spun around and shot daggers with her stare. "Don't."

"But—"

"I beg of you. Don't."

"Oh, Lydia!" Rebecca raised her voice, flailing her hands. "What do you want from me? Do you want me to promise I won't go near him again? Better yet, why don't I avoid all the men completely, that way if you change your mind—like you so often do—I won't ruin anything for you. Heaven knows your happiness is more important than mine!"

Lydia blinked hard, and her eyes went wide. Rebecca bit her bottom lip. She'd never once raised her voice to her sister in such a way. Tears began to fill Lydia's eyes, and she ran off to their room,

leaving the house chores behind. Rebecca started to follow her and then thought better of it. Instead, she finished the chores her sister left behind, leaving the breakfast dishes for last. She found it relaxing, scrubbing away the stains. It distracted her mind and all that mattered was making the china sparkle.

"What's wrong with Lydia?" Hannah asked, sitting down at the kitchen table.

Momma came into the kitchen with her mending basket. "What?" Momma asked, looking up at Rebecca. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Rebecca answered, just as Lydia walked in a bright smile on her face like everything was fine.

Everyone blinked at her.

"Why were you crying earlier?" Hannah asked bluntly, as was her nature.

"Oh, it was just my allergies. I wasn't crying, silly girl!"

"It looked like—"

"Oh, I'm sure it did! My eyes were waterfalls. Those blossoms outside always get to me. You know that."

"You've always been so sensitive," Momma said, nodding in agreement.

If only they knew how sensitive, Rebecca thought. She forced a smile, too, but she was careful to avoid conversation with Lydia. Rebecca found it exhausting. It was like walking on glass—one wrong step and there'd be a huge mess to clean up and a world of pain to bear.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, until the next morning, when Momma woke up in a frenzy. She started cleaning the house though everything was already in its place, and her hands flailed in every direction. Her words were a jumble. Finally, Rebecca approached her. Gently she asked, "Momma, what's wrong?"

Her wide eyes turned from Rebecca's face, to Hannah's, Lydia's and Noah's. It wasn't even yet light outside, and the clatter had woken them all. "Oh, nothing. The preacher is comin' this afternoon to check on us and I just want to make sure the house is presentable."

"It is," Lydia grabbed her mother's hands and looked into her eyes. "Everything looks fine. Why don't I make us some tea and we can sit on the front porch or go out to the garden. We can talk like we used to when I was little? Hmm?"

Momma nodded, allowing Lydia to lead her to the porch as Rebecca went back to brew the tea. Rebecca wished her mother wasn't always in such a fuss, worrying about everyone and everything, but that was who Momma was at heart. She cared so deeply about her family and fretted over their personal lives.

The sun's rays were lightening the eastern sky when Rebecca

delivered the tea. Her mother and sister sat on the porch swing together with quilts over their laps. This was what they would often do while Rebecca, her father, and Dan Junior would head out to the barn and work the horses. Rebecca didn't want to interrupt their moment together, but it was too early for her and Noah to start chores. Both he and Hannah had gone back to bed once it seemed Rebecca and Lydia had things in hand. Rebecca grabbed a quilt from the chair by the door and wrapped it around herself. She leaned in the door frame in such a way that she was hidden from her mother and sister but could hear their conversation as she watched the sun rising.

"Oh, how I want grandchildren," Momma said longingly.

Rebecca's heart ached. She hoped that she and Lydia would be able to provide this simple wish to their mother. Lydia said, "Soon enough you will have them, I'm sure."

"It's not that I don't love you, child. I just want this to continue long after I'm gone."

Both became quiet. The sounds of them sipping tea on the porch together intermingled with the sounds of the morning birds starting their song. With a sigh, Rebecca headed back into the house to get ready for chores. She ran into Hannah and Noah who were both fully dressed. "I thought you two went back to bed?"

Hannah shook her head. "We're already up. We may as well get the work done. Noah promised to show me what I needed to do to lend a hand."

Rebecca blinked at her sister. Hannah was so bookish, no one had thought of asking her to work in the livery. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure. Get ready. We'll make some toast and eggs for everyone."

A smile tugged at Rebecca's lips. "Breakfast, too? Maybe everyone should get up early more often."

Once Rebecca finished getting dressed for the day, she headed out to the table. Momma and Lydia had come inside, and everyone had a hearty breakfast before Hannah and Noah joined her for chores. Although she'd hoped that Lydia would let things go with the morning, she was wrong. Lydia still ignored her through the meal.

With a sigh, she got up to help her youngest siblings out at the barn.

"Don't forget!" Momma waved at her as she was leaving. "The preacher will be here for tea at noon. Make sure everyone is back from the livery, cleaned up, and presentable by then."

Rebecca nodded and rushed out to the barn. Between the three of them, they managed to get the barn work done in record time and managed to make themselves presentable for their preacher before he arrived.

A knock landed on the door and Momma answered it with a smile. "Oh, hello, Pastor! How have you been?"

"Oh, not too bad, Ora." He said accepting their mother's hug, before his eyes landed on the sisters. "What about you, gals?"

They nodded and smiled. "Right as rain," Hannah sing-songed, making the preacher chuckle.

"And Noah?" he asked, eyes on the young boy. "How have you been?"

"I've been managing," Noah said firmly with a sharp nod. He was trying so hard to pretend like he was a strong leader of this household, despite his small frame and limited life experience. Rebecca smiled proudly.

"Good to hear it!" the preacher said. "I wanted to discuss the matter of our dinner the other night, and how things have been coming along."

"Of course. Let us sit. I will get the tea." Momma rushed toward the kitchen.

Lydia led everyone to the living room and sat them around the table, waiting for the tea to arrive. The table had been freshly polished, and the house smelled lemony.

"Shall I begin?" the preacher asked as soon as Momma poured the tea and took a seat. "Have your daughters had any trouble with the menfolk who have answered the advertisement?"

Momma shook her head. "No, none at all."

The girls all nodded solemnly in agreement. It was such an awkward question. Rebecca nodded, though her near-kiss with Jake flashed across her mind.

The preacher smiled. "Good then. So, tell me, are there any men you girls have your eyes set on?"

"Oh, yes!" Lydia said in a shy, girlish voice. "Mr. Wheeler has won my attention out of all the others."

"What about you?" he asked Rebecca.

Rebecca looked down. "No." She let out a breath, and her eyes stung as she glanced over at Lydia. "No one yet."

A winning smile spread across Lydia's face, and it shattered Rebecca.

Momma excused herself abruptly and rushed toward her bedroom. It was not long before her sobs reached their ears.

Pastor Grisson eyed their mother's door but continued with the conversation. "Well, I've hope that we won't become a ghost town. We are a strong people, us townfolk of Brokken. We will thrive."

Their mother's sobs had quieted, but she hadn't returned. Things grew quiet for a bit, no one wanting to speak. Rebecca herself felt too pained to do so. She had never realized how little her sister cared for

her feelings in anything as she had at this moment. Noah then tried to speak about religion—anything to show how mature he was, but the conversation quickly fell apart and the preacher excused himself.

“Well, it’s been lovely meeting with you all. I do hope Ora is well, Please give her my regards. She is a truly kind soul.”

“We will,” Noah said, standing tall and leading the preacher to the door.

Once they were gone, Lydia turned a glare on Hannah and Rebecca. “I’ll check on Momma,” she mumbled. “Not as if either of you would care to.”

In that moment, Rebecca felt so much sorrow in her heart. She stood up, slammed her hands on her hips, and stormed off into her room. She threw herself onto her bed and let the tears she’d been holding back break free.

Chapter 14

That afternoon, Jake decided to return to the livery and help. He couldn't stand staying away from Rebecca. Maybe if he and Rebecca spoke to Mrs. Walsh and Lydia together, as a couple, they could help her younger sister understand the feelings that they had for each other. His heart had chosen the eldest Walsh sister, but he knew that breaking the younger's heart would be something neither he nor Rebecca wanted.

A shout reached his ears when he neared the barn, but it was a deep, manly voice that had made it. Jake picked up his pace and jogged into the barn, finding Noah in the stall, at the back of Lady, the persnickety mare. Her ears were pinned, and she swung her tail at him, and then stomped her back leg, threatening to kick.

"Calm down," Noah begged the horse.

"What's going on here?" Jake stepped forward and grabbed halter and lead rope from the floor where Noah had dropped them. He slipped them over the horse's face and steadied the mare, whispering to her and calming her down.

"How do you do that?" Noah asked, stepping up to his side.

"Horses are gentle creatures by nature, but they have a hierarchy. If you take on the attitude that you're the leader, they follow. But if you go in there acting like you're equals, they'll push their luck and see if they can't become the leader between the two of you."

Noah nodded. "I think my Papa used to say the same."

"It's the way horses work. The more you spend time around them, the more confident you become. The more confident you are, the faster horses will accept you as leader without coercion."

"So, I don't need to be rough with them, just confident."

Jake nodded and held the lead rope out toward him. "Here you try. When you lead her to the paddock, stay to her side. Don't let her choose to get ahead of you or lag behind. Tug her and make her stay right at your shoulder.

Noah did as Jake said as he led Lady out to the paddock and the horse remained calm and in his control. He released the mare and then gave Jake a wide smile. "Thank you."

“Sure thing. Where is your sister?”

Noah frowned. “She’s not feeling well.”

“Oh. Well, let me help you with the rest of these chores.”

After helping Noah, Jake returned to the mostly empty bunkhouse and noticed someone standing by his dresser. The drawers were open, and the hands were rifling through it. *Emmet*.

Jake coughed.

Emmet spun around, his eyes strained for a moment, nervously, but he quickly replaced his features with a blank slate. “Oh man, no wonder none of this looks right. I got turned around and am on the wrong side of the room. I was looking for my matches.”

Jake sighed, and slipped into his bunk. His heart was filled with fear. In Atlanta tensions about the war were still high. He’d come to Texas hoping to get away from it all and start to heal. If he couldn’t keep his episodes under control, he’d need to leave Brokken and try again elsewhere. It would pain him but also Rebecca. He only imagined the hurt that it would cause her given how close they had gotten over the last few weeks.

“Everything all right down there?” Emmet asked as he climbed into his own bunk.

“Yeah, everything is fine.” Jake snapped. He hopped up and went for a walk. But once he was clear of the bunkhouse, he ran.

Jake ran until he was covered in sweat, and his heart was pounding, but no matter how far he ran, he couldn’t leave this place. It would be admitting defeat, and it would mean losing Rebecca. If there was at all any chance of that not happening, he knew he had to stay. He couldn’t flee. Not now, not now that he found someone he wanted to share his life with.



THE NEXT MORNING, Rebecca finished up the morning chores with Noah. The whole time, her mind had been reeling. She saw how much pain this was causing her family, but she knew it would all be taken away if she just chose someone else. The thought of doing that struck her with a deep sense of loss, and she was suddenly hit with wave after wave of grief. She couldn’t have a future with Mr. Wheeler, no matter how much she wanted it. She couldn’t have her father and brother back, no matter how much it hurt. And then there was their mother. Momma had been having fits of sadness. What if it was more than that? What if she was ill and that’s why she was always so upset? Rebecca couldn’t bear to lose her mother, too.

Taking a deep breath and wiping away a tear, Rebecca worked to gain control over her emotions. She couldn’t break now. There was

too much work to be done. Just as she composed herself, Emmet appeared. "Everything all right, miss?"

Rebecca blinked up at him. "Yes. Everything is fine."

"I hope you don't mind, and I hope I am not overstepping my bounds here, but I am worried for your sister."

Fear gripped her heart at those words and her hands fisted on her pitchfork. She looked around as though Lydia might appear before them at his suggestion of her. Finally, she choked out a response. "Why is that?"

"I know she has taken an interest toward Jake Wheeler. But I hate to inform you that he is not a good man. In fact, he is a traitor to our country. And he is dangerous."

"Oh?" Rebecca asked, breathless. She couldn't even begin to fathom these words, but why would this man have reason to lie to her? "I don't understand. What do you mean? Please speak plainly."

"Mr. Wheeler isn't telling the whole truth. He committed some crimes in the war and is on the run. I followed him here to Brokken. I just don't want your sister getting hurt because of this."

Rebecca opened and shut her mouth for a moment, shaken by what she'd just heard. The pitchfork she'd been holding slipped from her fingers. Emmet caught it and returned it to her hands.

"I just thought you should know." He tipped his hat and started walking away. "Please look after Lydia for me."

Rebecca nodded and forgot to breathe. Truth rung in Mr. Emmet's words. And she couldn't let her sister be hurt by a man like Mr. Emmet described. "Lydia!" Rebecca screamed, dropping the pitchfork again and running to the house. "Lydia!" she repeated when she entered the kitchen.

Lydia ran out of their bedroom, eyes wide. "What is wrong? Is Momma all right?"

"Yes," Rebecca said, waving her hands helplessly as she tried to catch her breath.

Lydia sighed a breath of relief and then glared at her. "Well, what on Earth are you screamin' for, Becca?"

"I just talked to... someone said.... that Mr. Wheeler is a dangerous man," she stammered. "He said that he betrayed his country and well... I just need you to know this ... because—"

"Because you're pathetic and jealous," Lydia cut her off.

Rebecca shook her head and blinked hard, trying to recover from those harsh words. "No, Lydia. I swear this has nothing to do with my feelings—"

"Oh, so you finally admit it. You still have feelings for him."

"Lydia, can we not do this? I am trying to help you."

Lydia shook her head. "No, you're not. You're just jealous, and you

want to steal him from me. I can't believe you, Becca! I don't even know you anymore." Lydia ran out the back door, slamming the door behind her.

Rebecca slouched against the wall and took a deep breath. Tears stung her eyes, and she gripped her chest. She headed toward her bedroom and knelt beside her bed in the quiet of the afternoon and prayed. "Why is this happening to me?" she pleaded, "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Chapter 15

When Jake was headed back toward the livery, he found Lydia walking from the house toward him. His step faltered as he considered turning around and going the other way before he was spotted. But Lydia looked up and a smile spread across her face before he could make a decision.

"Mr. Wheeler," she said, her voice low and musical.

"Oh, hi, Lydia. How are you doing?" he kept walking toward the barn, hoping that if he seemed busy, she wouldn't stop and chat with him for too terribly long.

"Oh, you know," she said, tilting her head and stepping in pace with him, turning around and heading into the barn, too.

"Uh. Well, where is Rebecca?" he asked. The horses nickered as he stepped inside. He immediately started checking water buckets.

Lydia huffed. "Who knows? Probably spreading terrible gossip. Look, I thought you and I could spend some time together... just us two?"

"What?" Jake asked, taken aback.

She stepped closer to him and reached her hand to touch his face. "You really are handsome."

"Oh, well thank you." He tried to pull back, but Lydia reached around his neck and pulled him to her.

"I think we should enjoy this moment? Before anyone else comes along—" She leaned in to kiss him, but he quickly pulled away, gently pushing her from him.

"Lydia, I can't. I am so sorry. I am flattered, truly, but I cannot kiss you."

Her brows crinkled, and she frowned like a petulant child. "Why not?"

"I do not have feelings for you like that. I am not..."

"Attracted to me? You don't think I am pretty?" Her bottom lip stuck out, and tears welled in her eyes.

"Oh, Lydia, it's not that. You are a beautiful woman, but truth be told, I am in love with your sister."

Lydia gasped and shook her head. "That can't be."

"I'm sorry." He set a hand on her shoulder to comfort her but kept his distance. "I really am. I never meant to hurt you."

"Stop it!" She shrugged him off and looked around the stable, anywhere but him. Her hands fisted as her face turned red with anger.

Jake shook his head and took a step back. Everything in him told him there was nothing he could do to help this situation. This didn't turn out at all the way he had hoped. "Maybe it's best if I leave you alone."

"Sure," she yelled. "Go ahead and leave. Like leaving is just gonna make it all better."

"What can I do that will help?" he asked, frowning. "Anything?"

Her face screwed into several expressions as emotion passed through her eyes. She held her breath for a short bit and then finally, she whispered, "Just go."

Jake nodded, tipped his hat at her, and walked away, leaving Lydia to herself. The whole walk back to Brokken Arrow Ranch, he kept his head down, deep in thought. He hadn't wanted to confront Lydia that way all by himself. He had hoped that if he and Rebecca had done it together, with Mrs. Walsh for support, things would have turned out differently. He passed through town where they were beginning to set up the festival. As he passed through, Emmet shouted something, and a large wooden slat fell toward him. Jake jumped into action and caught the wood before it crushed him.

Emmet met eyes with him, wonder and surprise filling them as they widened. "Thank you."

"Not a problem," Jake answered holding up the slat. "Do you need a hand?"

Emmet nodded and began nailing up the slat that he'd been trying to hold and nail up at the same time. "I'm really looking forward to the festival. It will be a good chance for us leftover men to have some fun and meet more of the eligible ladies besides just the Walsh sisters."

Jake narrowed his eyes at him. What was Emmet trying to say exactly? Even though there was a coldness between the two of them, and Jake didn't trust the shorter man as far as he could throw him, he helped him build what turned out to be a booth for a pea shooting game. "Will you be running this booth yourself?"

Emmet shook his head. "I was helping one of the ladies to make it for her two sons."

"Right nice of you."

He shrugged. "Trying to do what I can to help things get along smoothly. Want to help me with one more booth? Two workers are definitely better than one."

Jake didn't really want to spend time with Emmet, but what choice did he have? He nodded. "Sure."

The afternoon wore on as they worked and helped others with building their booths for the festival. Two hours passed in a short time. When they found a stopping point, Jake excused himself and found himself headed back to the livery. His heart longed to see Rebecca again, hoping she was doing better since the last he'd heard she was sick. When he got there, the stables were eerily quiet, and he was flooded with memories of Lydia's attempts to seduce him, and the brokenness in her eyes. He wished he didn't have to break her heart. He wished he hadn't done whatever he did to lead her on, that he had been more aware.

Lost in his thoughts, he barely noticed the missing horse, until he turned to his right and saw the empty stall. Then he realized the eerie quiet had been the lack of the horse's greeting when he'd come in.

"Lucky?" The stall was open. How did that happen? He ran out to the paddock where Lucky was occasionally turned out, calling the horse's name as if he'd respond and come running like a pet dog, but he knew better. He needed to find Rebecca and tell her.



REBECCA HAD FINALLY PULLED herself out of her bedroom and as she came into the kitchen she realized someone was missing. She turned to Hannah, "Where is Lydia?"

"Come to think of it," Hannah said, "I don't think I have seen her for most of the day."

"Where could she be? Most of the men are helping set things up for the festival, and I'm sure she wants to look nice for..."

"I'll look for her."

Rebecca shook her head. "No. Finish getting supper ready. I'll see if I can find her. Maybe she is helping Momma."

Lydia was not in the house, even though Momma was lying down. She asked Momma about it, but she hadn't seen her. Nervous energy gathered in her chest. She tensed as she pulled open the back door to head to town to see if she could find her sister, but she literally bumped into Mr. Wheeler who stood on the back porch, hand raised to knock. Her heartbeat raced. Quickly she collected herself and put on a stone-face. "Sorry," she whispered.

"It's fine," he said and reached over to tuck her hair behind her ear, but she pulled away. "What's wrong?"

"I can't find Lydia," she said, meeting his blue eyes.

He frowned.

"What?" Rebecca asked.

"Well, see, I was comin' to tell you that Lucky is missing."

"What?" Rebecca gasped. "Oh no!"

Lydia hadn't been on a horse in ages. Could she have possibly taken Lucky? She shook her head. Why would her sister do that? But inside, she knew why. Lydia had never taken an interest in the horses, but Rebecca had found her sneaking carrot tops to Lucky more than once from the kitchen. She didn't say anything about it, but she knew that Lydia had done it to feel closer to Fritz. Even when they were young children, it had always been Lydia and Fritz. When they'd become older, their friendship could have become something more, but both the older brothers had gained an interest in Lydia. And ever the flirt, Lydia had relished their attention. But Rebecca had been there when Lydia had cried the day that Fritz left for the War. And when he had returned, he wasn't quite the same man who had left. But it didn't seem that Lydia had really let Fritz go until the Brokken Brothers had robbed the bank in town. Since then, Lydia had acted as though she hated him. Yet, she still had an attachment to Fritz's horse, Lucky.

But that attachment couldn't save her sister from a green horse. Her jaw clenched. "Lucky's not completely broke yet. If my sister has taken him..."

"I'll go get the sheriff." Mr. Wheeler said and ran off to get help.

Rebecca was beside herself with worry. Would Lydia run off like that because of the argument they'd had earlier? If this was her fault, she'd never forgive herself. Just as she was ready to collapse to the ground with fear, Hannah appeared and held her up. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"No. Lydia is missing, and Lucky is gone, too."

"Oh, no!" Hannah squeezed her tighter. "It'll be all right," she promised, but it was a promise they long learned no one could make.

It was a promise both their father and brother had once said. A promise their mother made daily. Death could claim anyone—they knew that better than anyone else—and Rebecca could see it in Hannah's eyes.

If only Papa was here, Rebecca thought, none of this would be happening. Lydia wouldn't have run away. Life would have been different. And if she did run, he would find her in a second. He always knew where to find her. This wasn't the first time Lydia had run away. She ran away when she was eight years old once, and nobody could find her, but Papa did. He knew where she'd go if she was sad, and Rebecca only wished she knew her sister so well. Rebecca's regrets were drowning her. Why hadn't she taken time to notice her sister more? Why hadn't she paid better attention.

After what seemed like no time at all, Mr. Wheeler returned with Emmet, Sheriff Victoria, and one of the other men. She blinked in surprise at them for a minute wondering how they'd gathered so

quickly, and then she remembered that they'd been getting the festival prepared.

"We need to find her before nightfall if possible," Sheriff Victoria said, taking charge.

Rebecca helped them tack up some of the horses in the livery that the town used for just this sort of occasion. But there weren't enough horses for her and everyone else. She wrung her hands, but Hannah pulled her back toward her. "It's better to let them go and wait here with me. You're too distraught. You know how the horses can read your feelings. They'll get skittish because of your nerves. And besides, we need to tell mother and that's not going to go well."

Hannah's hazel eyes met hers. Even though Rebecca shook her head and wanted to fight it, inside she knew her sister was right. It was better that she didn't get on a horse right now. When she watched the men and Sheriff Victoria ride off together, Rebecca sank into tears and turned toward the house to tell her mother.

Chapter 16

Jake reined in his horse with the other two men in front of the sheriff whose eyes were narrowed and serious. "Now, let's split up. We'll cover more ground that way. There are four of us, so I'll head north, the rest of you pick a direction on the compass."

Heart pounding and fear coursing through his veins, Jake agreed. "Sure. I'll go west then," he pointed.

Emmet nodded, eyes hard. "I'll head east."

The sheriff nodded toward Billy. "That leaves south for you. We'll meet back in town after dark should we... need to."

The sun was setting fast. They only had a half hour of daylight left, if that. Jake headed to the west, chasing the sun, hoping that somehow, more daylight would come to him from heading this direction. Even though the land was flat, and he saw nothing of Lucky or Lydia, occasionally he'd call out her name, until finally, he heard the faintest answer.

"Jake?" she shouted back.

Collecting himself, he hopped off his horse and shouted, "Where are you? Keep talking so I can find you!"

"I'm here!" she shouted.

Jake continued to follow her voice until he found her, lying in a ditch.

"Oh, thank goodness!" she cried when she saw him.

"Where is the horse?" he asked, looking around.

"Is that your honest concern right now?" she snapped.

Blushing, he said, "No. Sorry. Let's get you out of there."

Jake tied a rope to a nearby tree and held it himself at the end and asked, "Can you climb up?"

"Are you insane? I fell, and I can't even stand. My ankle – it hurts too much. A rabbit jumped out of a bush, and that horse bucked me off into this stupid ditch."

"He's not fully broke yet, but it's fine. Lydia, I will get you out of there. Let me climb down, and I'll carry both of us out."

He climbed down and asked her if she could put any weight on her ankle, and she tried, tears spilling from her eyes.

"No," he said, unable to bear to see her tears. "Come now, I'll carry you." He scooped her into his arms and looked at her, making sure she was fine, despite the bruises and scrapes and possible broken ankle.

"I'm sorry for the words we had earlier," Lydia mumbled.

"It's nothing," he said. "Come on. We better get you back home. Rebecca is worried sick about you. I've never seen anyone so distraught."

"Oh no!" she cried, leaning her head into his shoulder. "I am such an awful sister. I am a terrible human being. She must hate herself right now, and it's all my fault."

When they reached the top of the ditch, Jake set her on his horse and started walking back toward town. The sun had begun to set in earnest, and the light had faded to a golden hue. "You can talk to Rebecca when we get back."

"I feel so stupid right now. Nothing I planned went the way it was supposed to." She sniffed.

"Things rarely do turn out the way we plan."

"I like you, Mr. Wheeler. But not the same way Rebecca does. She loves you, where as I found you to be a great distraction."

Although his heart fluttered at the thought that Rebecca might return his love for him, a frown tugged at his lips. He didn't turn back toward her nor did he say anything. He just led the horse on to see if she'd continue.

She did. "I was jealous. The love of my life fell to pieces, and it was my own fault. And though I love my sister, and I want to see her happy, there was just something in me that didn't want her to have what I couldn't right now."

The light continued to fade, but the town of Brokken acted as a beacon, a light on the horizon he headed toward.

"I'm an awful person. I've let this disagreement with my sister go on for days and days when I shouldn't have." A sob escaped her.

Jake didn't turn back, but he said, "I'm sure Rebecca will understand. Just talk to her when we get back."

Lydia didn't respond but cried softly the rest of the way back to town. Night had fully fallen by the time they rode up to the livery and Lydia had quieted. There stood Mrs. Walsh, Rebecca, Hannah, and Noah—all awaiting the arrival of their sister. Rebecca in tears, sobbed hysterically the moment she saw them. She ran to the horse and was crying her sister's name before Jake had even gotten Lydia down from the saddle. He set her on the ground, and she leaned against the black and white mare as Rebecca ran toward them.

"What happened? Are you all right?" she cried and flung herself at her sister. Before Lydia could even respond, Rebecca wrapped her into a tight hug.

"I'm fine," Lydia said, but Rebecca continued to sob.

Rebecca pulled away to look into her sister's face. "I am so sorry for everything I did. I shouldn't have acted this way. It's all my fault, and I—"

"Stop it!" Lydia cried, her brows furrowing as she frowned.

Rebecca nodded and stepped away. "I understand if you can't ever forgive me."

Lydia shook her head and pulled her sister back into a hug. "I don't need to forgive you," she said. "There's nothing to forgive. Everything is fine. I promise."

Jake felt guilty for listening in on what should have been a private moment between the sisters. But Lydia still leaned on the horse, and Jake didn't want to move the mare until things settled down. Mrs. Walsh joined in the hugs and apologies, and Noah and Hannah helped their sister walk toward the house just as Emmet, Sheriff Victoria and Billy arrived. The sheriff immediately turned around to get the doctor.

Emmet helped Jake take care of the horses while the family had a private moment inside. As they finished bedding down the horses in the light of the lanterns, Emmet walked up to Jake and set a hand on his shoulder. The shorter man's brow furrowed as he frowned up at him.

Jake tensed, and his heart pounded. Was this the confrontation he'd been anticipating?

Emmet shook his head and looked toward the lights in the house. "I wished I'd been the one that found her and saved her. Maybe then she'd look at me."

A breath Jake hadn't known he'd been holding came out slowly, easing the tightness in his chest. "I'm sorry I got in your way of that. Don't give up though. Lydia might still come around."

Emmet shrugged, and then gave Jake another long look. "You're a good man. I've been watching you these past few weeks, as I am sure you've noticed, and I just have to say that I was wrong. You are not that kind of guy I thought you were. You came through to rescue Lydia and you cared about how I felt ... toward her ... and well, I appreciate all your help. I'd say, you're honorable, Jake Wheeler."

And the knot that had been in Jake's stomach loosened a bit. Maybe Emmet was a trustworthy man after all and maybe Jake could honestly find the healing he needed in Brokken.

Chapter 17

“I hope Lucky is all right,” Rebecca said, looking out the living room window toward the shadow of two men standing in the barn aisle.

“The horse?” Lydia asked. “I am so sorry I took him.”

Abby the doctor finished wrapping up Lydia's ankle. “It's a sprain. Just stay off this a few days and chew some willow bark if the pain gets worse, as I expect it will in the morning.”

Lydia nodded, but scrunched up her face. Rebecca smiled. Her sister hated the bitter taste of the bark. Even the sheriff stood with her face scrunched.

Then the sheriff turned toward Rebecca. “The horse was born here in town. I can't imagine a gelding like him will feel at home in the wild. It wouldn't surprise me if he showed up either here or at the ranch.”

Rebecca nodded. “You're right. We should be looking out for him. I should probably tell Deborah, since it's her horse.”

Sheriff Victoria shook her head. “Don't worry. I'll let her know. And speaking of Deborah, I need to get going.”

Relieved, Rebecca nodded.

The pastor sat with Momma at the dinner table, and at first Rebecca felt like he was consoling her and keeping her calm, but their mother's spirits were up higher than Rebecca had seen in a long time. It made her feel good to see her mother like this. The lights went out in the barn, down to one lantern. One of the men left, but the other stayed behind. It had to be Jake. She really needed to talk to him. Everyone inside the house seemed to be doing fine, and Rebecca took this opportunity to slip out with the intention of telling Jake straight out that she didn't want to hurt her sister and she'd push him in the direction of courting Lydia.

When she stepped into the light of the barn, Jake stood up from the hay bale where he'd been sitting. They both stared at each other in an awkward silence for a moment. Finally, Jake asked, “How is Lydia doing?”

“It's all my fault that Lydia is hurt,” she said, wringing her hands

in front of her and feeling a sob threaten to bubble up.

"Your fault? Don't you mean mine?" He eyed her, frowning and shaking his head.

She blinked at him. "What... What do you mean?"

"Lydia found me in the barn looking for you today. I don't know why you weren't here, but she was."

Rebecca thought she could see where this was going, and she just wished he'd stop. She didn't need to know the details; he chose Lydia. This was what she'd wanted. She winced, preparing herself for the things she didn't want to hear.

He continued, "She kept saying that she liked me, and she tried to kiss me."

Rebecca nodded solemnly, a lump forming in her throat as she stared at the way a moth cast shadows in the lantern light.

"I didn't know what to do," he whispered.

"It's fine," Rebecca said, looking back up at him with as much of a smile as she could muster. "I never expected our moments to mean anything beyond friendship. I know that you like Lydia—and who wouldn't? It's fine that you kissed her, Jake. It's fine that you chose her over me. I understand, and I won't be upset or hurt."

"Rebecca, you're not listening," he said, stepping toward her.

"I think I am," she snapped.

"No." He laughed. "You're not. Listen. I didn't kiss her. I pushed her away. I told her that I don't like her the way she wants me to. I told her that I can't be with her, because I am in love with her sister. With you."

Rebecca's stomach flipped. "But I thought..."

"I know what you thought, silly woman." Jake reached over and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "That's why I said that this whole thing with Lydia was my fault and not yours."

Her heart pounded in her chest. Nothing was making any sense right now. She couldn't understand. "What do you mean?"

"Well, if it wasn't for me rejecting Lydia, she wouldn't have run away. She didn't run away because of anything you did. She ran away because of—"

"The both of us," Rebecca finished. "She knew I liked you, but then I heard this terrible rumor about you..."

He sucked in a breath and his eyes went wide before they hardened, and he looked at her much like he did that one day before she'd dropped the rack of bits on him. "Emmet Forest."

She nodded. "And I went to tell her, but she wouldn't believe me. She thought I was trying to stop her from being with you, because I wanted you. I mean, I do." She blushed. "I like you, but that wasn't why."

He frowned. "But things have changed now."

She blinked at him. "Yes, they have. I almost lost my sister, but you returned her to me. Jake, even if you've done horrible things I trust you. I believe in you."

His face softened. "I could tell you..."

"Not here. Not now," she said. "It doesn't matter." She shook her head, blushed and then looked up at him. "And I love you, too."

Jake took a step forward, his arms up like he would take her in his arms and finish that kiss they'd almost had earlier, but feet shuffled behind them. They both jumped, separated, and darted glances toward Emmet, who held a chestnut horse by the reins.

Rebecca blinked. "Lucky!"

She ran over toward him, slowed down and gave the horse a hug around the neck. Emmet chuckled. "He showed up at the ranch, and Miss Deborah wanted me to bring him back to you."

"Thank heavens he came back." She began checking over his legs for any injuries. Then together the three of them took care of Lucky and bedded him down for the night. Sheriff Victoria, the pastor, and Doctor Abby came by the stables, happy to see that Lucky returned as well.

Together the five of them left, and Rebecca's heart soared as she went toward the house, looking longingly back toward Mr. Wheeler, now knowing that they both had the same feelings for each other. When she headed into the house, she found everything quiet and everyone already in their beds. She entered the room she shared with Lydia and Hannah, but neither was yet asleep.

"Everything went well out in the barn?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, Lucky is back, too." She smiled at them while she removed her boots and got into her night clothes.

"I'm so relieved to hear that." Lydia said, letting out a deep breath while she lay flat on her bed. "And I owe you an explanation for running away."

"You don't," Rebecca said looking over toward her sister.

"Yes, I do. I was so mad. Mr. Wheeler rejected me, and then I just felt so dark... like why was I such a selfish person? I had so much inside me that I couldn't let out, and when I saw Lucky in the stall it reminded me of Fritz. And I just missed him. Missed what we had together. I guess when I saw Mr. Wheeler, I thought maybe I could feel that way again, but when he rejected me, I just wanted to run away, like I could find Fritz, and what we had again. And I know that you were working with Lucky and I was jealous of that too. So, I took him because I also knew it would hurt you."

Rebecca stared at her sister in disbelief. She had never seen Lydia be so honest.

"Sometimes, Becca, I feel like there's a storm in me, and I can't let anyone see. You know, the only time that storm seemed to calm down was when I was sitting in that ditch, cold and alone. And then Mr. Wheeler showed up, and he was so nice to me, and it made me feel even worse. All this time, you had been apologizing when I was the one who should have apologized. Becca, I am sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course." Rebecca stood and stepped toward her sister's bed.

Lydia blinked up at her. "I mean, truly forgive me. Not just because you feel like you have to."

Rebecca shook her head and lay in her sister's bed, wrapping her arms around her. "Lydia, I forgave you the moment these things happened. I was never mad at you. I understood you had your reasons."

"You're a far better person than me, Becca."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Rebecca laughed.

"Can you girls be quiet? Some of us want to sleep!" Hannah chimed in.

"Oh, you shush. You know you're just as excited and awake as the rest of us." Lydia laughed.

"Well, maybe... but aren't we gonna wake Momma? She needs her rest."

A small thud sounded from the window and the girls jumped.

"What was that?" Lydia hissed.

"I don't know," Rebecca whispered, sitting up.

Hannah tugged her blankets up to her shoulders, as if she could hide from whatever was causing the noise. Rebecca stood and the girls whispered at her to sit back down.

The noise sounded again.

"It sounds like someone is throwing rocks at us."

"Who?" Hannah asked, scared.

Rebecca had a feeling of who it might be, so she stepped to the window and pulled the curtains back. The girls let out a gasp, and Rebecca just laughed, as Jake waved shyly at her.

"It looks like I have a visitor," she whispered.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Lydia sighed. "Couldn't he wait until morning?"

"Clearly not." She laughed again and held up a finger for him to wait a minute, to which he nodded and shyly looked down.

"Well, don't do anything I wouldn't do," Lydia said with a laugh.

"I can't believe how scandalous my sisters are," Hannah mumbled from under her covers.

Rebecca shushed her sisters. "I'll only be a minute, and besides, I believe Mr. Wheeler and I are now courting."

Both her sisters gasped and then giggled. Rebecca shushed them again and then threw on some clothes and headed outside. When she met him, her heart thundered in her chest as she ran to him and wrapped her arms around his body in a hug. He felt so warm in her arms. She wasn't sure what his plans were for being here, but she trusted him with her entire heart, especially after he helped to find her sister. He took her by the hand and pulled her toward the barn and lit the lantern. Then he stopped and turned toward her. "We never got to finish that kiss," he whispered, his ears and neck turning red, as if she might reject him.

They had shared so many important moments in the stables, and she was glad that he brought her here for this one. She leaned toward him. Letting her breath mingle with his. His blue eyes grew soft as he hesitated, his lips just a fraction of an inch from hers. But she didn't want anything to interrupt them this time. So, she reached her hand around his neck and pulled him to her. His lips crashed into hers, warm and soft. His eyes went wide in surprise, but then softened. She kissed him with a thousand thank yous, a thousand words she could never say, and all the love in her heart.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close, deepening the kiss. And then he took one step back. His leg hit a bucket, and they fell together in the hay. At first his face went red, but then he chuckled. And she laughed with him. Laughter danced around them. Rebecca felt happier than she could remember being, and for once she didn't feel guilty about it, except that maybe this behavior was a wee bit scandalous, like Hannah had said.

"We better get back," she whispered and kissed him one last time.

"Tomorrow I want to talk to your mother and the preacher about marrying you," he whispered.

Her heart skipped again. "Tomorrow?"

"If that's all right with you?"

She couldn't say anything, just nodded.

When they stood, his fingers laced with hers. He walked her to the back door of the house and bent down to kiss her again. She couldn't get enough of his warmth and this feeling she had in her chest. It was hope.

"Until tomorrow," he said.

"Tomorrow," she answered and squeezed his hand.



About the Author

P. Creeden is the sweet romance and mystery pen name for USA Today Bestselling Author Pauline Creeden. She loves a good mystery and grew up watching Colombo, Perry Mason, and Murder, She Wrote. Books have always been a focal point of her life, from Nancy Drew and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to thrillers like John Sanford.

Animals are the supporting characters of many of her stories, because they occupy her daily life on the farm, too. From dogs, cats, and goldfish to horses, chickens, and geckos -- she believes life around pets is so much better, even if they are fictional. P. Creeden married her college sweetheart, who she also met at a horse farm. Together they raise a menagerie of animals and their one son, an avid reader, himself.

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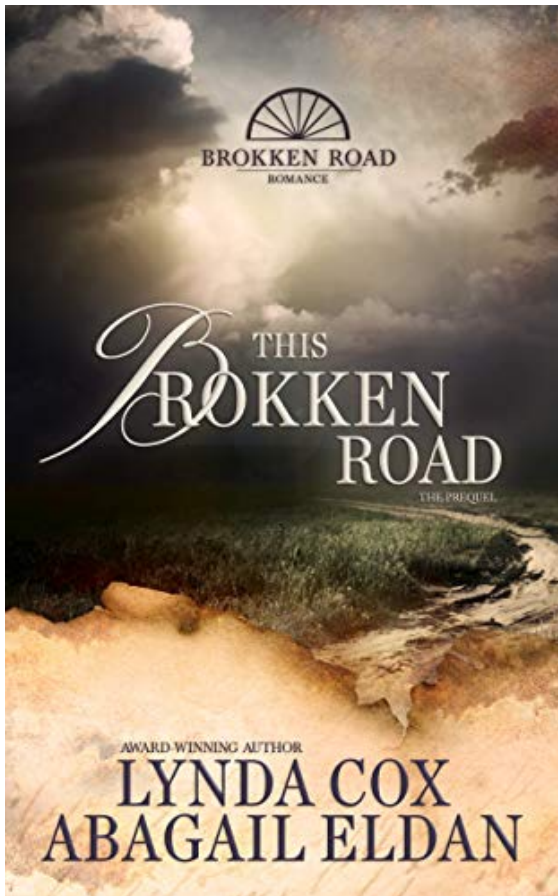
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This Brokken Road



<http://bit.ly/ThisBrokkenRoad>

Storms in life bring devastation but may also clear a Brokken Road.

Abigail Bailey and Deborah Brokken mourn the decimation of their town. Many sons of Brokken, Texas never returned from the Civil War. Those who did remain divided.

Abigail grieves for the loss of her husband and for those around her. Broken lives, broken hearts, and broken dreams haunt the citizens of the town. Deborah, especially, is affected. Her father founded Brokken, and her own brothers have destroyed his legacy.

Is it too late for the good folks of Brokken to unite before their

hometown becomes another casualty of the War?

Brokken Knight



<http://bit.ly/BrokkenKnight>

Hearts break. Armor tarnishes. Honor remains.

Brokken, Texas, 1867

Abigail Bailey isn't sure her idea was wise. She's not even sure she can love another man after her beloved Sam perished in a Union run prisoner of war camp. But her town needs a doctor, and she has decided to accept any man competent to do the job. Yet doubt plagues her. What will he think when he finds she is uneducated, so much so that she did not pen her own letters to him?

The Civil War broke Dr. Mathew Knight. His decisions of who to

save, who to allow to die, even what to use, haunts his every step. He can never be unbroken, but he wants a chance for his son. Four-year-old Ethan has been left terrorized after witnessing atrocities no one should have to see. Mathew's child needs a mother. He hopes Abigail Bailey may fill that role, an omission he made in his letters. Perhaps, too, he'll have a chance to start over, maybe even to find a reason to practice medicine again.

Two broken people in a broken town might be what they each need to become whole again.

Brokken Arrow



<http://bit.ly/BrokkenArrow>

Chance Hale wants to find solitude. Forgiveness is beyond reach. Deborah Brokken yearns for the family she has lost.

When Chance and Deborah meet on the Brokken Road does healing or more heartache await?